

## 10 Snow falling on snow (fragments in a history of not-listening)

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Excited as he was by tempestuous phenomena, John Cowper Powys showed an equal appreciation for fugitive sounds barely perceptible to human senses, as intangible as Marcel Duchamp's concept of the infra-slim. 'The words were almost as faint as the sub-human breathings of the plants in the conservatory', Powys wrote in *A Glastonbury Romance*. 'They were like the creakings of chairs after people have left a room for hours. They were like the open and shutting of a door in an empty house. They were like the groan of a dead branch in an unfrequented shrubbery at the edge of a forsaken garden. They were like the whistle of the wind in a ruined clock-tower, a clock-tower without bell or balustrade, bare to the rainy sky, white with the droppings of jackdaws and starlings, forgetful of its past, without a future save that of anonymous dissolution.' Of the many epiphanies of sensation and their fusion of eroticism, masochism, pagan mysticism, neurosis, personalized mythology, and natural sensitivity that teem within Powys's 1929 novel, *Wolf Solent*, one of the most haunting images is of silence descending like a great bird of death: 'After he had rung the bell he was struck by the curious silence that always falls down on the thresholds of houses, like the feathers of some vast overshadowing bird when house bells are rung.' The author enjoys this deathly avian shadowing so much that he writes two versions (admittedly separated by more than four hundred pages): '... and silence seemed to fall down upon that place like large grey feathers from some inaccessible height.' For Powys, any environment, sacramental, excremental or exalted, was potentiality: a place in which mundane perceptions might become sufficiently intense to

dissolve the familiar boundaries of experience: 'This was what he wanted to cry out; but he did not dare to utter a whisper. The room had become enchanted. It was a dedicated place — set apart.'

All silences are uncanny, because we have become estranged from absences of sound. An uncanny silence falls when it envelops or drifts down into a sounding world, like snowfall muting an otherwise noisy city, as if the presence of nothing can soak up noise, a white blotter that retains its whiteness no matter how much ink is absorbed. Then silence is heard more clearly, like fog, through whatever faint shapes can be discerned within. No silence out there; no silence in here either; though there are many species of silence.

There is a private silence, the drift of consciousness that murmurs at the edges of awareness. If I listen in to this drift, I hear what I may choose to conceal from others, perhaps even from myself. Lying on the floor, on my back, eyes closed and empty-minded though trying to dispel a headache, I fall into a drift of hypnotic narrative that is suddenly wiped away by the intrusion of a single voice, saying (no, not saying, because saying demands a speaker, an activation), so an audible emanation, then, whose words are: 'Go to Toop'. Any connection between this cryptic instruction and the narrative is impossible to trace, because the voice clears out all that came before it. I lie there, hearing the high frequency fizzing of my ears, a stomach gurgle, little else. Though hard to place, the voice is not a complete stranger to me. A constant, familiar flow of thought, the so-called inner dialogue that disciplines such as meditation seek to quiet, is not heard so much as felt — a complex of emanations — whereas this 'other' voice is always heard, as if through a miniature radio buried within the black emptiness that corresponds spatially to the volume of my brain. 'David', it says, or to be more accurate, she says, because the voice is always female. The tonal quality is familiar; a composite, I would say, of certain women who have been significant to me, now absent in different ways. If I were mystical, mad or religious, a spiritualist, or believed unequivocally in an afterlife, then the presence of the voice would be quite logical.

But I am not mystical, mad, religious, or a spiritualist, nor am I persuaded by heaven or hell except as metaphors and symbols, so the voice is not logical or easily explicable. What it seems to be is a clear memory, a revisitiation so vivid that its clarity separates it from thoughts I identify as my own. No ears are involved: the voice utters distinctly in a void, a small yet infinite place between the ears giving me some indication of what it

might be like to hear the voice of god, demonic voices, malicious voices, voices instructing me to kill, and any other incidents of internal speech that may or may not be auditory hallucinations. 'Daddy, I hear the voices again, waaagh, s-s-s-s-s, I even hear the foot-tracks,' sang 'Scream' Jay Hawkins on his 1962 recording of 'I Hear Voices'. There is no single silence; there is no one voice. That entreaty to Daddy (a Daddy now beyond the grave, we presume) is revealing. Can the absent father salvage the collapsing identity under attack by unravelling this tangle of voices, by differentiating this confusion of senses?

## STUCK IN THE MIDDLE WITH YOU

In the late 1960s, the Secretary of the British Board of Film Censors, John Trevelyan, gave a public lecture in London. Held in a prestigious venue, the event was quite an occasion, and as far as I can recall he discussed the limits of censorship and the ways in which these limits were flaunted and so pushed further into previously taboo areas by filmmakers. To illustrate his point, Trevelyan showed short clips from films that would never be shown uncut in the UK (or so he believed at the time). One of them, disturbing in its violent misogyny though far less gory than a twenty-first-century horror comedy like *Shaun of the Dead*, was Japanese. In the clip, a woman lies in the bath. A man walks into the bathroom, stands behind her and slashes off her ear with a cutthroat razor.

Maybe the ear (and I am speaking generally here, rather than in reference to brutalized women in Japanese cinema) asks to be cut off, in the way that the design of the nose asks Roman Polanski in *Chinatown* to stick his knife up into Jack Nicholson's nostril and slash sideways. Perhaps that sudden severing influenced Michael Madsen's notorious ear amputation scene in Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (Tarantino is, after all, scholar without peer when it comes to malicious surgery in Asian cinema), but the Bible holds precedence in its story of Malchus, a servant of the high priest, whose ear was struck off by the sword of Simon Peter. Jesus touches Malchus's ear and heals him, though the miracle is only noted in one of the gospels, in Luke 22.51.

*Mad Detective*, a Hong Kong film co-directed in 2007 by Johnny To and Wai Ka Fai, features a clairvoyant/clairaudient policeman as its central character. This gift, or burden, of extrasensory perception allows the

detective to solve cases by re-enacting them, or by seeing inner personalities and hearing sounds that are inaudible to normal sensory capabilities. Early in the film, he cuts off his right ear, presents it as a leaving gift to his superintendent, then for the rest of the film wears a plastic false ear. His reasons for this brutal self-immolation are never made explicit; for the other characters it serves as one more example of what they perceive to be his mental instability. Yet as the story develops, the corrosive effects of possessing such faculties become apparent, and so his sacrifice symbolizes what he relinquishes, the protective limitations of the outer senses, in order to exercise his extrasensory perception.

#### ENTOMBMENT

A high-jumper at the Beijing Olympic Games completes the jump that will gain him a silver medal, stands up, turns to the crowd and with an expectant look on his face, cups his hand to his ear. 'Hark! Hark! What shout is that?' Agamemnon asks in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. 'Peace, drums.' Calling for sound, calling for hearing, gathering in audio approximation — I can't hear you, make some noise — his gesture is the antithesis of the 'shhh', the hush.

We can see seeing, but we can't hear hearing. To speak about hearing requires qualifiers, supplementary words, appendages, elucidations, approximations. The equivalence of a gaze is intensive listening; peering is straining to hear; a stare is somewhere between eavesdropping and listening avidly, yet not quite. As for pictures of nothing (to borrow the title of Kirk Varnedoe's famous lectures on abstract art) . . .

For Henri Lefebvre, our emphasis on seeing has resulted in complex phenomena being reduced to the simplified state of images. The social existence of space is repressively visualized. 'In the course of the process whereby the visual gains the upper hand over the other senses, all impressions derived from taste, smell, touch and even hearing first lose clarity, then fade away altogether,' he wrote in *The Production of Space*, 'leaving the field to line, colour and light. In this way a part of the object and what it offers comes to be taken for the whole.'

Within the history of Western thought, seeing has been regarded as the most active sense, the king of senses; seeing is often categorized as masculine, hearing feminine, as if in the most stereotypical gendering of

perception, seeing goes out to penetrate — phallic, the hunter, the warrior — whereas hearing gathers in, enfolds, receives, gestates. Ears are the instruments of darkness. Leonardo da Vinci believed that losing sight was a form of incarceration, an entombment (the dark senses): 'Whoso loses his eyes leaves his soul in a dark prison without hope of ever again seeing the sun, light of all the world.' Though all these polarisations are crude, there is no doubt that eyes are the reflective lights of the exterior self, giving off signs of interiority, whereas ears burrow into a dark, concealed unknown ('All dark and comfortless,' is Gloucester's response in King Lear, when asked by Cornwall, 'Where is thy lustre now?'). Eyes are open, shut, active, moving, eyelids blinking and closing, the eyes reflecting what they see, face working with or against the eyes, lashes fluttering, eyebrows raised or narrowed.

Metaphorically, eyes run over somebody's body, scrutinize a face, search, mist over, shine, squint, cloud over, harden, soften, flicker, narrow, widen; eyelids flutter, droop and close. An eyebrow can be quizzical; the forehead can crease into a frown. A look can be piercing, searching, dirty, hard, sharp, questioning, pitying. There are bedroom eyes, sorrowful eyes, and any number of other eyes: wide, bright, sad, cold, soulful, clouded, roving, lazy, sleepy, baggy, rheumy, watery, dry, dead, peeled, bug, glass, one, wild, shifty, unseeing, eagle, x-ray, beady, dim, downcast, wall, cross, and this is without the colours. There are fleeting glances, penetrating stares, averted gazes, eye-to-eye contact. In *The Last of the Mohicans*, there was Hawk-eye. In cartoons, eyes can suddenly pop out of the body, on stalks or springs, usually accompanied by a boiiiing! Let's take a closer look. Since Lacan, we have the Gaze and the Mirror Phase. Eyes can be masked. Make-up accentuates the eyes; spectacles can be a fashion item, a statement; contact lens can change the colour of the eyes. Eyes are vulnerable: they can be scooped out, bashed in, slashed, blackened, blinded. 'Pluck out his eyes', says Goneril, and after the first of Gloucester's eyes is plucked, Cornwall despatches the second, 'Out, vile jelly.'

Surprisingly few of these terms, metaphors and functions can be applied to the ears, though despite their curvaceous form, ears may be described as sharp. They can also be pierced. Prying eyes will usually be augmented by prying ears — though the former sounds correct, the latter does not. Keep your eyes and ears open seems a logical way of telling somebody to stay alert, except for the fact that ears are always open unless stopped with hands (as in Caravaggio), fingers or plugs. Shivering through and through



his nervous system with the strange sensations of school, the lighting of gas lamps that 'in burning made a light noise like a little song', homesick Stephen Dedalus longs to be home and laying his head on his mother's lap. James Joyce, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, has Stephen leaning his elbows on the refectory table, shutting and opening the flaps of his ears. The roaring noise of the refectory reminds him of a train at night, and when he shuts the flaps he thinks of the train at Dalkey going into a tunnel, the roaring suddenly stopped. The coming and going of the sound and the memory it evokes is a comfort to his distress.

The eye observes the eye, loving or despising itself, judging all other organs and forms according to the moist colourful lustre and depths of itself. In their external form (to the eye), ears are dull and passive, immobile and technical, shells of shells; cloth-eared, jug-eared, cauliflower-eared; Big Ears, Dumbo. Handles on a soup tureen, they are conveniently placed as secure symmetrical rests for spectacles and sunglasses. A theorist of intelligent design might argue that such economic functionalism was planned in anticipation of these inventions, but just how intelligent is it to design defective eyes?

Just as the bull's-eye is at the centre, the oculus admits the light of reason. If the eyes are windows to the soul, then ears must be tunnels to some other place, some darker zone of unreason, or simply a channelling of inner feelings described, by implication, in common sayings, as too subtle and elusive for the rationalism of seeing. An old song by The Stylistics fused this idea with the neatness of a phrase devised to educate children in road safety: 'It's never too late, too late to stop, look, listen to your heart, hear what it's saying.' Not only listen to your heart, which is logical, but listen to your instincts, listen to your inner voice (and that egregious invention of new age psychobabble: listen to your inner child). For this mode of hearing the ears must be turned in, tuned to an inner darkness that will also suggest activities such as prayer. For those who are believers, the inner self opens out to an auditory plane encompassing the entire theological universe, though there is another inner auditory reality, explored by Tom Rice in his short story, 'The Doctor'. Dr Francis, a cardiologist whose relationship to stethoscopes borders on fetishism, hires a prostitute to visit him at home. Instructing her to undress to the waist, he derives erotic pleasure (or finds release from insomnia caused by hyperacusis) from listening to her heart-beat through the 'heavy alloy headpiece' of an Allen Gemini stethoscope: 'Then suddenly he seemed to clinch, to seize the sound he was seeking out.

His ears gathered up the beat, dusting and polishing it, until each round thump resonated strongly and colourfully. It was as though someone was beating a huge drum. A clean powerful sound. This was the beat to which the human race marched, the rhythm to which all life was played out — the sinus rhythm.'

'The patient's pulse was a hundred and twenty,' wrote Vladimir Nabokov in *Invitation to a Beheading*, 'the chest over the seat of the pain was dull on percussion, and the stethoscope revealed fine crepitation.' All hearing animals can audit the body's sonic expulsions of vocalisations, vomiting, sneezes, snores, wheezes, belches and farts, but close listening also reveals a close and interior sound world of corporeal functioning: the beating heart; breath entering and exiting the nostrils; clicking eyelids and jaw; the chewing of food (now recognized as being an important component of taste); contractions of the throat; saliva in the mouth; the gnathosonics of teeth clashing or grinding during sleep (the latter known as nocturnal bruxism); otic-acoustic emissions from the ears; bones, joints and ligaments clicking and creaking; the crunching, bubbling sounds of crepitation or rales, heard from diseased lungs; the wonderfully named borborygmi, which are the sounds given off by food and digestive juices passing through the intestines; and the continuous hum and intermittent crackle given off by muscles. These latter noises were first documented by a seventeenth-century scientist and Jesuit priest from Italy, Francesco Maria Grimaldi, who found that by placing his thumbs in his ears and then clenching his fists, he could hear a quiet rumbling. This is reminiscent of a Chinese Qigong exercise, Kou ji yu zhen, or knock and beat the jade pillow, in which the ears are covered by the palms. The index and middle fingers are then snapped down on the cavity areas underneath the external occipital protuberance, producing a loud rejuvenating drumming that fills the head.

Some of these sounds, such as teeth grinding, breathing, chewing and borborygmi, are clearly audible to others, but all of them can be heard externally, given the right conditions and instruments. To say that a person is silent is simply a figure of speech; to sense a presence in a room is actually to hear the combined audio activity of a body at rest. Most uncanny of all are the sounds emitted by bodies after death. 'The Countess was stretched on her bed', wrote Wilkie Collins in *The Hated Hotel*. 'The doctor on one side, and the chambermaid on the other, were standing looking at her. From time to time, she drew a heavy stertorous breath, like a person oppressed in sleeping. "Is she likely to die?" Henry asked. "She is dead," the doctor

answered. "Dead of the rupture of a blood-vessel on the brain. Those sounds that you hear are purely mechanical — they may go on for hours."

## FIGURES OF SPEECH

I'm all ears, as if hearing can engulf the other senses, become the body as receptor. This expression has great potential for irony, or outright sarcasm: fill me up with your worthless sound.

'You guys can talk the ears right offa my head,' says actor Ed Begley, in Sidney Lumet's 1957 film, *12 Angry Men*. What he means is, go so far as to amputate my ears with your sharp chatter but even then I won't listen.

An ear to the ground (the Indian scout dismounts, presses his ear to the earth, senses a distant vibration of hooves, stands, gravely informs the cavalry troop that a large war party of Apache is heading their way).

Pin your ears back, as if in normal circumstances ears are folded forward, like shutters, obstructing the free flow of sound.

Ears prick up, metaphorically speaking, though not in the expressive directional pantomime of dogs or cats.

One minute the ears are unlovely, faintly ridiculous, then love can change everything, the intricate shape and curve and folding and interior pathway of an ear explored through touch of finger and tongue, breath and whisper, privacy and seclusion. Secrets and intimacies are passed, person-to-person, with the same sensation of merging as any other sexual exchange. The razor hiss of a whisper becomes a caress. 'My baby whispers in my ear, mmmh, sweet nothings,' sang Brenda Lee in 1960, sotto voce not an option for her fabulous blowtorch voice. 'Things he wouldn't tell [pause] nobody else [pause] secret baby, I keep 'em to myself'.

## FLESH HORNS

In a metaphorical sense, or in cartoons, ears can grow into open flesh-horns or trumpets. Leonora Carrington's drawings for her novel, *The Hearing Trumpet*, depict the listening device as an extendable sinuous cone — elephant trunk, phonograph horn, spiritualist ectoplasm — that can insinuate its way into spaces in order to hear things otherwise inaudible. As with large-eared nocturnal creatures such as the Fennec fox, jerboa and bat, her enhanced

ears swivel and expand in their collection of audio data. 'People under seventy and over seven are very unreliable if they are not cats', says her friend Carmella. 'You can't be too careful. Besides, think of the exhilarating power of listening to others talk when they think you cannot hear.'

'Father was listening', wrote Bruno Schulz in *The Night of the Great Season*. 'In the silence of the night his ear seemed to grow larger and to reach beyond the window: a fantastic coral, a red polypus watching the chaos of the night.' This conception of the ear as a gathering device or reversed trumpet, a prosthetic supplement to the main body, extends to the notion of detachability, hence one of the most familiar passages from Shakespeare, Antony's address to Rome's citizens after the murder of Caesar: 'Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.' Hence, also, the famous wartime phrase, 'walls have ears', which suggests that ears may grow within the fabric of a building, like the fungi they resemble. In Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's film, *The Lives of Others*, listening devices (bugs, rather than fungi) are embedded into walls, light fittings, and beneath wallpaper in order to eavesdrop on the private sounds of suspect citizens. These continue to nest silently under their domestic camouflage, even when the paranoid regime that implanted them has long since disintegrated, even when the brain connected to the ears has ceased to exist.

## THE BUTCHERED EAR

Sun is the enemy of the ear. On a sunny day in Leiden, birthplace of Rembrandt van Rijn, Gabriel Metsu, Gerrit Dou, Jan Steen and Lucas van Leyden, everybody is sitting outside to take their lunch in the spring warmth, everybody except saxophonist John Butcher. As I get older, I tend to avoid hot sun, and besides, I enjoy John's company so I join him. We talk about this avoidance of direct sunlight and he tells me that in 2007 he was diagnosed with a malignant melanoma on the top of his right ear. This was cut away but he has to stay in the shade to protect against further outbreaks. His ears are now slightly different shapes. Embarrassed to stare so closely, I study them and begin to see what I had missed before: his right ear is smaller than his left. We talk about the effect this operation may have had on his hearing. John's playing is as focussed on the minutiae of difference in frequencies and tonal aggregations as any saxophonist anywhere, so he had been listening for a change in subtleties of sound heard from right

to left. In practical situations nothing had altered in his sonic perception, but having suffered from tinnitus for twenty years, he discovered an online hearing test called Tone Tester. If the subject is listening on headphones, the software moves an identical sine wave signal back and forth between the two ears. What he discovered at frequencies below one kilohertz was a difference between the 'colour' perceived by each ear, and in some ranges a slight difference in his perception of the fundamental pitch, a common condition called binaural diplacusis, that is resolved into an average frequency by the brain (the English composer and suffragette Ethel Smyth had to cope not only with deafness, but with a semitone difference between the hearing in her right and left ears).

Later, he sent me this note: 'I guess the earphones and pinna [the outer part of the ear] generate some overtones, and you have ear canal resonances and who knows what going on in the inner ear. Anyway, when I tried this after the operation, I thought the effect was more pronounced but it could be my imagination. It's hard to compare subjective things over a period of time, especially when you weren't expecting the change.' What I find intriguing about this story, aside from the provocative iconography of the (butchered) ear, is the evident subjectivity of hearing. Even for professionals such as John and myself, changes in hearing, loss of hearing and psychoacoustic phenomena can be difficult to monitor accurately. Every year I go to professionals to test the state of my teeth and eyesight, yet I have never had a test on my hearing, despite knowing that once teenage years are over, hearing begins to decline. Commonly experienced psychoacoustic phenomena such as the phantom effect, in which the brain builds coherent patterns of sound from noise or very weak and even non-existent signals, or the hypersonic effect of inaudible high frequency signals on brain activity, call into question the shared reality of what we hear. A progressive loss of sight is quickly noticed, but hearing loss is only measured by the vague and unreliable method of comparing elusive memories across time, or from the feedback of others. What is it that we don't know of ourselves? What do we know of what we hear; what is absent from our hearing? What? I can't hear you? You'll have to speak louder.

The most famous ear in the art of the Netherlands is a lacerated ear, that of Vincent van Gogh. Like the sliced eye that opens interior vision at the beginning of the Bunuel/Dali film, *La Chien Andalou*, or the eyes of Georges Bataille's *Histoire de l'Oeil*, Van Gogh's attack on his ear goes beyond his own madness. The true circumstances or reasons for this act of self-harm

are unclear — perhaps an escalation of tension between him and Gauguin — but the ear was wrapped in newspaper and given to a prostitute named Rachel for safekeeping. In *The Yellow House*, Martin Gayford's account of the nine weeks when Van Gogh and Gauguin shared a home in Arles, two narratives are identified as focal points for obsession, as Van Gogh became increasingly tormented by voices. One was Zola's novel, *The Sin of Father Mouret*, in which one of the characters chops off a friar's ear, the other being the story of Christ's agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, when one of the disciples chops off the ear of the high priest's servant. After the incident Van Gogh was unable to say why he had maimed himself in so specific a manner. 'However, there were some clues', Gayford writes. 'It seemed that Vincent, who could not normally sing, had sung in his madness. He had sung "an old nurse's song," because he was "dreaming of the song that the woman rocking the cradle sang to rock the sailors to sleep." That was, he explained to Gauguin, the same subject "for which I was searching in an arrangement of colours before I fell ill."

Van Gogh's 1889 *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear*, in the Courtauld collection, shows him gaunt, cold, haunted, his eyes fixed on some part of himself between brush and painting. On the wall behind him, strangely angled as if attached to the left side of his head, like a rectangular ear, is a Japanese print showing two women wearing kimono, Mt Fuji in the background. The bandage on his right ear muffles sound, perhaps serves to block out voices, disturbance, everything other than the seeing of a great painter. 'For my part I don't need Japanese pictures here,' he wrote to his sister, 'for I am always telling myself that I am here in Japan. Which means that I have only to open my eyes and paint what is right in front of me, if I only think it effective.' Seeing and imagination are his only necessities; the rest is immaterial. In 1930, Bataille devoted a short essay — 'Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh' — to the subject of this wounding. The act is characterized as a sacrifice, 'a drive revealed by an inner experience', in the context of Van Gogh's solar obsession. For Bataille, the ear was a 'relatively unimportant' part of the body to lose by comparison with that most unthinkable of sacrifices, 'the Oedipal enucleation' (Oedipus blinded himself after discovering that Jocasta, his wife and mother, has committed suicide). 'The one who sacrifices', he wrote, 'is free . . . free to throw himself suddenly *outside of himself* . . .'

Another Dutch painting of an ear that would be notorious had it not been lost is noted by Polish writer Zbigniew Herbert in his essay on the



seventeenth-century painter known as Johannes Torrentius. Convicted of a long list of moral offences and crimes including heresy, Torrentius was liberated from his prison sentence in Haarlem after the King of England, Charles I, sent a letter of appeal to the Prince of Orange. Torrentius was released in 1630 and sent to England, where he is known to have painted a number of works. Included in the inventory of the collection of Charles I is a painting of 'a woman pissing in a man's ear'. This, along with all but one Torrentius painting — the *Emblematic still life with flagon, glass, jug and bridle* of 1614, in Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum — is now either lost or hidden away in secret collections. But in the self-mythologizing of Torrentius, his paintings were not material creations. 'He was surrounded by an aura of mystery', wrote Herbert, 'and legends circulated about what took place in his atelier, tales about supernatural forces he brought into his work. Probably Torrentius thought a certain dose of charlatanism did not harm art . . . he used to say he did not in fact paint but only placed paints on the floor next to his canvases; under the influence of musical sounds they arranged themselves in colourful harmonies.'

On this subject of missing ears, Lafcadio Hearn's *Kwaidan* included his translation of a supernatural tale from Japan, 'The Story of Mimi-Nashi-Hoichi'. A young blind monk, Hoichi, is persuaded by ghosts to play his stringed biwa every night to what he believes to be a large, illustrious company. In fact, he has been performing alone in the cemetery. To protect him from the persistent attentions of these ghosts, the priest of the temple paints his body with texts from the holy sutra Hannyasha-Shin-Kyo, the Doctrine of the Emptiness of Forms. When the ghost returns that night, Hoichi is invisible to him except for his ears. 'Here's the biwa', he says, 'but of the biwa-player I see — only two ears! . . . So that explains why he did not answer: he had no mouth to answer with — there's nothing left of him but his ears. . . . Now to my lord those ears I will take — in proof that the august commands have been obeyed, so far as was possible . . .' He then grips the ears and tears them off. The priest had given his acolyte the job of painting Hoichi's ears, but they were forgotten. At the end of the story, Hoichi's misfortune leads to wealth and fame — many people travel to the temple to give him gifts in exchange for a recital — but the lasting impression for the reader is conveyed by the inadequacy of ears and the terrible punishment visited upon them. Without sight, a person is vulnerable to supernatural forces. Invisible and immaterial, ghosts are more at home in the domain of hearing.

## OPEN MOUTH

7 November 2008. Lying in the dark at 1.00 am, waiting for sleep, I hear somebody roaring in the street. Looking out of our bedroom window I see what seems to be an ordinary man, probably in his early thirties, walking along the centre of the road between parked cars. He is moving quickly but after every few paces he stops, throws back his head and roars loudly, like an angry, wounded beast. Each roar is slightly different but his actions appear to be entirely unselfconscious, as if they come from some deep and violent derangement. He looks and sounds bestial, enraged, so engaged with these sounds that he can only let them loose on our sleeping neighbourhood.

## SEETHES UNDER MY SKIN

One moment, by a wooden railing, sky and sea swirling in waves of energy, their force flowing from a white ghost head that clutches and covers its ears, the sides of its skull, as if to hold the head securely to a body that waves in attractive sympathy toward the sweeping sound waves shrieking from an open O mouth of an unseen horror. This is Edward Munch's *Skricket, The Scream*, first painted in 1893, one of the most famous, influential and frequently stolen paintings of the modern period, a work whose violent shout broke into the homely quietude of what Munch described as 'interiors and people reading and women knitting'. This insight came to him in a bar, as Romanian music carried him off into his own thoughts, as he watched a man whisper into a woman's ear, her eyes shut, her lips open. 'What we cannot see is whether it is an internal or an external pressure that is the cause of the horror', writes Poul Erik Tojner in his monograph on Munch. 'The sound rises and falls like blood pulsing through the picture. It is as if the person is trying to press the plasmatic magma out of his body, yet at the same time, it appears as if he might implode. There is an exchange of traffic, not on the road but between eye and ear.'

Like his Norwegian contemporary, Knut Hamsun, Munch listened with such heightened intensity and introspection that he came to realize that the body generates sound within silence. Quiet is a complex of many sounds. 'I lie at night and listen to my heart beating', he wrote. 'I hear the blood roaring in my ears — it fills my head — it seethes under my skin and in the tips of my fingers and toes. My skin tingles.'

'How they buzz, those billions of worlds that stream along from the skin to the heart — rhythmically steered by the beating of the heart. Billions of worlds push forward. They wish to find a path out of their confinement. Yet they have to return over and over again. It gushes in the canals of my ear — it vibrates in my limbs — those billions of worlds.'

The belief that vibrations of light and sound could transmit powerful energies was fundamental to his work. As an example of how such vibrations might intersect with propitious circumstances to produce dramatic effects, Munch wrote this brief narrative: 'A gentleman enters and sits down at a table. A woman stands stiffly — cold and pale behind him — she speaks a tiny word — seemingly indifferent, the man immediately collapses, grabs a revolver and shoots himself.' Along with speculations on correspondences between sound, light and colour, telegraphy, ether and electrical vibrations, Munch made a number of notes describing the events that led to his first version of *The Scream*. 'That shrill bloody red', he wrote in the most vivid of these recollections. 'On the road and the fence. The faces of my comrades became a garish yellow-white. I felt a huge scream welling up inside me — and I really did hear a huge scream. The colours in nature — broke the lines in nature. The lines and colours quivered with movement. These vibrations of light caused not only the oscillation of my eyes. My ears were also affected and began to vibrate. So I actually heard a scream. Then I painted *The Scream*.' And in another, written in block capitals, each word, even letter, a different colour: 'The sky turned suddenly to blood and I felt nature utter a huge scream.'

Spreading and merging into the ambient scream of nature, the scream of this transfigured man resonated through the twentieth century. In his essay on Mark Rothko, 'The World in a Frame', David Anfam hears it reverberating, 'an emotional tide flooding from the self into its surroundings', in compositions by the young Rothko, even in the Seagram murals of the late 1950s, which '... immerse the beholder in a wilderness of empty, though deeply tinted or shadowed, mirrors.' We hear it also in the paintings of Francis Bacon, howls, snarls and screams reverberating in non-spaces, from *Man in a Cap* from 1943, the various Heads painted from 1947, *Fragment of a Crucifixion* and *Study After Velázquez* from 1950, *Study of a Baboon* from 1953, *Chimpanzee* from 1955, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* from 1944, right up to the 1988 version of *Triptych*. Always a gaping maw, bared teeth, a sightless scream to confront whatever is out there. We know that Bacon drew from sources such as the screaming nurse

from Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, from studies of animals, and from photographs of Nazis, but the silent scream rises over this archaeology of the visual. *Head II*, from 1949, unveils a grey, tortured bird-beast, a swollen lump fading or falling into the rhinoceros hide curtains of its darkened rooming. A croak in the gloom. *Head I*, painted between 1947–48, auditions another voice raging from tormented flesh, melting and fusing in anticipation of the cinematic body-horror monsters of John Carpenter's *The Thing* and Ridley Scott's *Alien*. As if listening in appalled curiosity, a disproportionate ear swivels toward the noise of its fellow orifice, an equally disproportionate mouth of vampire teeth and torn lip. The neck slides away to puddle into the floor of a room without room.

Simultaneously bestial, terrorized and sexual, these scraps and screams echo as unresolved stories, the 'fragments of narrative' identified within Bacon's work by David Lynch. Imagination can do its work of filling in whatever is absent, assisted by the condemnatory silences of those photographs that reveal to us the inhumanity of our time: a naked man pushed to the floor by a soldier, smear of blood wiped across the concrete from his taped knee, mouth stretched open in agonized scream. In the same prison, Abu Ghraib, in Iraq, the scream of a naked man terrorized by dogs, hands over his ears (a Caravaggio scene), attempting to shield himself from their murderous noise; then from an earlier era, screaming, open-mouthed, naked Vietnamese children, burned by napalm jelly and running for cover, surrounded by soldiers. In all cases, the contrast between uniforms and nakedness, between insouciance and terror, between quiet calm and involuntary screaming, is where we learn more about the depths of our depravity.

## CLOSED MOUTHS

Francis Bacon spoke about opening up the valves of sensation. This is what deep listening means: to go beyond a shielded, inattentive state (Stravinsky's distinction between hearing and listening); to allow sensation to enter and flood the body; to relinquish the manufacture of sound, if only momentarily; to hear the details of inaudibility. In his book, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, Henri Lefebvre described the human body as a reduction, an image of an entity that is reduced to manageability from the complex workings of many rhythmic processes. 'We contain ourselves by concealing the diversity of our rhythms', he wrote, 'to ourselves, body



and flesh, we are almost objects. Not completely, however. But what does a midge perceive, whose body has almost nothing in common with ours, and whose wings beat to the rhythm of a thousand times per second? The insect makes us hear a high-pitched sound, we perceive a threatening, little winged cloud that seeks our blood. In short, rhythms escape logic, and nevertheless contain a logic, a possible calculus of number and numerical relations.' Listening to the rhythmic beating of a bee's wings, we hear a buzz at around 200 Hz; listening to the faster rhythms of a mosquito's wings, we hear a higher whine, at around 1000 Hz. Within these apparently continuous sounds there are rhythms. In *Views From a Tuff of Grass*, Swedish author Harry Martinson's description of a dragonfly overpowering a robber fly emphasizes the auditory significance of the event: 'Often this happens so quickly that you can't detect it except by ear. First you hear the robber fly's muffled sound like a bow drawn lightly across the strings of a double bass. Then you hear the wings of the dragonfly rustle against each other as it turns and it enters into its attacking curve. That's the end of the robber fly. It goes dead silent and becomes a quick lunch al fresco. You listen for it but can't hear it anymore.' What we can understand of the world is reduced by the nature and limitations of our senses, then again by our restriction of their true potential. What Lefebvre proposed as a counter to 'thingification' or reification in modern thought was a new science, a new field of knowledge — the analysis of rhythms — with its practitioner, the rhythmanalyst, a person for whom nothing is immobile. 'He will listen to the world,' he wrote, 'and above all to what are disdainfully called noises, which are said without meaning, and to murmurs [rumeurs], full of meaning — and finally he will listen to silences.'

## INTIMACY

'Before entering the cabin I stood still listening in the lobby at the foot of the stairs. A faint snore came through the closed door of the chief mate's room. The second mate's door was on the hook, but the darkness in there was absolutely soundless.' This passage from Joseph Conrad's short story of 1910, 'The Secret Sharer', is striking for a number of reasons: an auditory tension that pivots upon eavesdropping and the fragility of a silent condition; then the characterisation of darkness as an equivalent or manifestation of absolute silence.

The story's narrator is a young sailor promoted recently to his first command as captain. Feeling the loneliness of isolation common to many of Conrad's central protagonists, he discovers a swimmer close to his ship. As it transpires, the swimmer — a man named Leggatt — murdered a man on his own ship, the *Sephora*, then escaped confinement, determined to sink and drown rather than answer the consequences of his actions. Similar in height and hair colour, trained at the same school, the two men then collude within the captain's quarters in a complex theatre of concealment, the unfolding and refolding of an eerie doubling. The two share claustrophobic, private spaces and a common secret. Often, they must do so in complete silence: 'It would not have been prudent to talk in daytime; and I could not have stood the excitement of that queer sense of whispering to myself. Now and then, glancing over my shoulder, I saw him far back there, sitting rigidly on the low stool, his bare feet close together, his arms folded, his head hanging on his breast — and perfectly still. Anybody would have taken him for me.' Conrad's description of this second self as silent corpse-double, enfolded and silent like a bat, reinforces the desperate role of sound. One waits to be activated by the other, yet they must move in well-drilled collusion. They whisper, they murmur; one eavesdrops upon the other, and on others.

The story emerges from stillness, 'very still in an immense stillness', as Conrad wrote, the ship 'anchored at the head of the Gulf of Siam.' This doubled stillness is so immense, the quiet communion so comforting, that only a cosmic event, the sudden appearance of stars in the tropical night sky, can disrupt its serenity. Following the cosmic comes the earthbound, the human: 'And there were also disturbing sounds by this time — voices, footsteps forward; the steward flitted along the maindeck, a busily ministering spirit; a hand-bell tinkled urgently under the poop-deck . . .'

At the level of sensation, the story turns upon stillness agitated, or emptiness filled. Bodies are mirrored or ghosted; the volatility of sound is so acute that its audition, suppression or amplification becomes vital to the containment of the secret shared. Conrad wrote of a 'profound silence' only disturbed by a 'quiet, trustful sigh of some sleeper inside', then, in the next breath, contrasting the security of the sea with the unrest of the land. This is a momentary silence, however, since the naked, piscine body of the swimmer emerges phosphorescent (suddenly, unexpectedly, like depression, phobia, a violent act, a natural force) from the 'darkling glassy shimmer' of the sea. Again, absolute stillness is punctured by the hiss of the captain's

cigar as it falls with an audible plop and short hiss into the water. No void can endure, Conrad seems to be saying, and ensuing events bear this out. What remains of the story is conducted under circumstances of extreme auditory and bodily restraint: earnest whispers, breathless whispers, fingers to the lips and similar silent admonitory signs, silences, exhalations, slight noises, desperate and hurried whispers, low bitter murmurs, words emitted with a hesitating effort, deadened voices, voices so subdued they become monotonous, slipping and stealth, bare feet making no sound, speech uttered under the breath, whispers that grow fainter and fainter. At one point the captain's double breathes anxiously into his ear. An implication, surely unintentional on Conrad's part, of closeted homotrotic inimicity grows from this painful subjugation of the sounding body, the present body. During a visit from the suspicious captain of the *Sephora*, shouting becomes necessary to help Leggatt eavesdrop on the conversation. When important information is mumbled, the host captain feigns deafness. In moments of crisis, the swimmer becomes as 'noiseless as a ghost' whereas the captain begins to lose control. He 'thunders' at the steward: 'My nerves were so shaken that I could not govern my voice and conceal my agitation.' This intense interweaving of dangerous voices, cultivated silences and rogue sounds is expressed through extreme pressures on bodies and vessels: 'At the sound of my voice he nearly jumped out of his skin, as the saying is, and incidentally broke a cup.'

Neither the captain nor the swimmer will ever hear each other's natural voice, though there are conciliatory aspects to this exercise in suppressed vocalism. 'The whispering communion of the narrator and his double — of the seaman-self and some darker, more interior, and outlaw self', writes Albert J. Guerard in his critical study, *Conrad: The Novelist*, 'must have been necessary and rewarding, since the story ends as positively as it does. But it is obvious to both men that the arrangement cannot be permanent.' Finally, as they sail desperately close under the looming black mass of Koh-ring Island to ensure the swimmer's silent exit back into the deep from which he first emerged, Conrad invokes Erebus, son of Chaos, whose name means shadow and darkness: 'Then stillness again, with the great shadow gliding closer, towering higher, without light, without sound. Such a hush had fallen on the ship that she might have been a bark of the dead floating in slowly under the very gate of Erebus.' In this ritualistic setting, the swimmer returns to the water, leaving only a hat floating on the surface as a visible trace. As he was on first emergence, Leggatt is headless (a precursor

of Bataille's Acéphale, the secret society and its review that declared in 1936, Bataille writing in a little cold house by the sea, hearing dogs barking in the night, Andre Masson singing in the kitchen, putting a recording of the overture to Don Giovanni on the gramophone, 'Human life is exhausted from serving as the head of, or the reason for, the universe.' As if then, reason and unreason have engaged in secret dialogue, of necessity in whispers, so unreason plunges back into chaos from whence it came.

## ONE FINAL SILENCE

Conrad described many silences: offended silence, profound silence, private silence, a silence of reproach, the jungle silence of *Heart of Darkness*, that 'did not in the least resemble a peace' and *The Lagoon*, with its silent forests and still air, in which 'every tree, every leaf, every bough, every tendril of creeper and every petal of minute blossoms seemed to have been bewitched into an immobility perfect and final'; then in *The Shadow-Line*, ship becalmed in an 'atmosphere which had turned to soot', a blackness that threatened to 'overwhelm silently the bit of starlight falling upon the ship, and the end of things would come without a sigh, stir or murmur of any kind and all our hearts would cease to beat like run-down clocks', the crew waits for the onset of a squall, preparing for the worst as 'all the time the black universe made no sound'. Through an aching jaw, the narrator becomes aware that he has been grinding his teeth in this tension, and is astonished that he failed to hear himself doing so. At that moment, the raindrops begin, 'Tap. Tap. . . . ' but then cease, leaving an intolerable suspense, which breaks, not as he expected, with the first crash turning him into dust, but in the most uncanny fashion: 'A heavy shower, a downpour, comes along, making a noise. You hear its approach on the sea, in the air too, I verily believe. But this was different. With no preliminary whisper or rustle, without a splash, and even without the ghost of impact, I became instantaneously soaked to the skin.'

At the conclusion of *The Secret Sharer*, silence becomes a vanishing — submerged; the underworld; utter black. To be silenced; a euphemism for murder. The auditory tension of the story, in which all sound is treated as an unnatural, if inevitable rupture of stillness (the cup before it breaks), questions the notion of silence as a possible absolute yet emerges out of the base condition of a hypothetical space in which sound and light are completely

absent: a darkness that is absolutely soundless. The polyphony of quietus resonates, at rest, and in the word's further senses of a final discharge of debt, the silencing of a claim, or death. 'When he himself might his quietus make with a bare bodkin,' says Hamlet, the release from suffering easily achieved through suicide by naked blade, but for the uncertainty of what lies beyond in the silence of death. Nothing moves.

This silence is a void that we have come to conceive as an impossibility. Through the influence of his writings, published lectures, and the conceptual milestone of his so-called 'silent' composition, 4'33", John Cage's twentieth-century redefinition of silence has resulted in an orthodoxy of belief: silence no longer exists. 'There is always something to see, something to hear', Cage wrote in *Silence*. 'In fact, try as we might to make a silence, we cannot.' Through their intensification of perception, modernist writers heard no silence. 'The sound of the bees diminished, sustained yet,' wrote William Faulkner in 1929, in *The Sound and the Fury*, 'as though instead of sinking into silence, silence merely increased between us, as water rises.' Virginia Woolf had explored similar territory in 1922, in *Jacob's Room*: "'There's no such thing as silence," he said positively. "I can hear twenty different sounds on a night like this without counting your voices." Typically for Woolf, clues to the rationale behind this seemingly random remark glimmer only faintly in the preceding conversation: a deaf old man, reciting the names of the constellations; a passing comment about 'the silent young man'. Mr Erskine, who made the observation, is challenged to give examples. He begins his list — the sea, the wind, a dog — but swiftly loses his audience. Silence is just silence for some people; nothing more nor less. Woolf recognized that silence, for her somewhere between a state of mind and an intensity, must be allowed to rise through an obscuring murk. In a prescient passage from *To the Lighthouse*, published in 1927, silence is submerged beneath 'busy' everyday images of cleaning, tidying and farming.

And now as if the cleaning and the scrubbing and the scything and the mowing has drowned it there rose that half-heard melody, that intermittent music which the ear half catches but lets fall; a bark, a bleat; irregular, intermittent, yet somehow related; the hum of an insect, the tremor of cut grass, dissevered yet somehow belonging; the jar of a dor beetle, the squeak of a wheel, loud, low but mysteriously related; which the ear strains to bring together and is always on the verge of harmonizing but they are never quite heard, never fully harmonized, and at last,

in the evening, one after another the sounds die out, and the harmony falters, and silence falls.

Centuries earlier, the Chinese poet, Po Chü-i, gave an example of the body's sounding (tinnitus induced by that terrible intersection of drunkenness crossing over into a hangover, perhaps) in his poem, *After Getting Drunk, Becoming Sober in the Night*, written in the year AD 824, or thereabouts:

All the time till dawn came, still my thoughts were muddled;

And in my ears something sounded like the music of flutes and strings.

Silence might be described as a paradox — an amplification of slight events within a low-level auditory environment. The audible evidence of this can be heard in Philip Gröning's film, *Into Great Silence*, a document without commentary showing life inside the monastery of Grand Chartreuse, where monks of the Carthusian Order have taken a vow of silence. Yet the vacuum of their speechlessness is filled by a sounding out of movement, breath, the turning of book pages, footsteps on stairs, sighs, scissors, throat noise, creaks, air, bells, bodies moving, chairs, fabric, echoes, an electric razor, singing, poured water, floorboards, a plate rocking on a table, keys, cart wheels, bird song, melting ice and snow thaw, the shovelling of snow, squeaks, a wood saw, falling wood, an axe, and in a most general sense of life in motion the contact of materials both soft and hard echoing in otherwise quiet, reverberant spaces or dispersing through open air. The emptier the space of sound, the greater the apparent volume of sounds within it; the lower the level of auditory background, the more intense the listener's awareness of minimal interferences. Quiet becomes loud. This is the basis of the uncanny atmosphere of many supernatural stories — silences into which anomalous, inexplicable noises intrude to shatter all rational belief for those who hear them, the beauty that precedes terror, as Rilke wrote.

In *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins (more of a 'sensation' novel than a ghost story), the moribund central space around which events circulate and develop is the soundproof, lightproof room of Mr Fairlie, an enfeebled, dictatorially fastidious man who shields himself from external disturbances. The normal volume of a speaking voice, the movement of a chair (even though muted by thick carpet), the suspicion of what he calls 'some horrid



children' heard in his private garden, all upset his over-refined sensibilities. Collins's satire of Fairlie, directed perhaps at those Victorian men who sought to remove themselves from the distractions and nuisance of society (those horrid children, or the urban poor, trying to earn money by playing musical instruments in the street) by building soundproof rooms in their homes, establishes a context of hyperacousis, into which each barely perceptible sound signals a spreading entrapment: the breathing of an injured dog, light footsteps, rustling silk, overheard conversations, the scraping and scratching of a quill pen.

Sound is the villain, shifting in its allegiances, deceiving, spreading instability, yet silence is equally unreliable. At times, this becomes a contest of the microsonic. The familiar representation of women's quiet domesticity and virtue is twisted into a deadly struggle of near-silences, nothing on nothingness, of who can produce the quietest quiet: 'The sound had not caught my ears. But I was then deeply absorbed in my letters; and I write with a heavy hand, and a quill pen, scraping and scratching noisily over the paper. It was more likely that Madame Fosco would hear the scraping of my pen than that I should hear the rustling of her dress.' The most ingenious villain of the book, Count Fosco, is large and loquacious, yet his most unsettling quality is an uncanny capacity to move without sound. 'I heard his sympathetic voice travelling away from me by degrees', writes Frederick Fairlie, one of the multiple narrators of the story. 'but large as he was, I never heard him. He had the negative merit of being absolutely noiseless. I ventured to make use of my eyes again, after an interval of silence — and he was gone.' This is ironic, considering Fairlie's obsession with noise, yet the engine of the story runs on these nuanced contradictions and oppositions, through which sensibilities, emotions and bodies are stretched to breaking point.

Eavesdropping is a weapon deployed by adversaries on both sides of this muted struggle: '... silence is safe — and we have need of safety in this house', says Marian to Laura, mindful of eavesdropping and a deepening sense of threat. Silence is also an opportunity, a portal, as when Count Fosco is overheard exercising his canaries: 'I waited a little while, and the singing and the whistling ceased. "Come, kiss me, my pretties!" said the deep voice. There was a responsive twittering and chirping — a low oily laugh — a silence of a minute or two — and then I heard the opening of the house door. I turned, and retraced my steps. The magnificent melody of the prayer in Rossini's "Moses," sung in a sonorous bass voice, rose

grandly through the suburban silence of the place. The front gate opened and closed. The Count had come out.'

In such a world, silence can only be realized within the interstices of fullness, though that fullness may itself be another level of stillness or silence. A creeping sense of the uncanny derived from the impossibility of silence is the contradiction upon which Conrad so effectively constructed his strange, strained tale of a secret shared, and through which Collins built an atmosphere of instability and helplessness. Yet without the conception of a symbolic condition called silence we are unable to fully articulate or express many profound passages and extreme states of existence: the familiar definitions of peace, tranquility, stillness, absence, emptiness, nothingness, withdrawal, blankness, unconsciousness, isolation, solitude, alienation and deafness, but also rejection, erasure, oblivion, incommunicado, solitary confinement, grief, repression, suppression, death, genocide, extermination, total destruction, the abyss. Rachel Carson's influential polemic on environmental destruction, *Silent Spring*, Shusako Endo's *Silence*, a novel depicting the persecution of Christians in seventeenth-century Japan, or Orlando Figes's *The Whisperers: Private Lives in Stalin's Russia*, illustrate the potency and concision of this metaphor, if metaphor it is, as shorthand for oppression, catastrophe, and in the case of Endo's novel, the troubling question for Christians of God's silence. Silence may be a loss of language in a literal sense, as in Susan Hiller's *The Last Silent Movie*, 2008, a projected work in which the screen remains black for 20 minutes, other than subtitles, but the projection room is filled with the sound of voices speaking languages either extinct or endangered: Ngarrindjeri, K'ora, Kulkhassi, Nganasan, Welsh Romany, Silbo Gomera (the whistled language of La Gomera in the Canary Islands), and nineteen others. 'So if this is such an unusual collection of sounds, what is the word "silent" doing in the title, its presence there so paradoxically loud?' asks Mark Godfrey in his catalogue essay. 'The word "silent" encourages us to question the processes through which these languages have been silenced, to question, for instance, whether these languages have become silent because people stopped speaking them, or whether they were silenced as other refused to listen? Did colonizers force people to stop speaking their languages, or have cultural groups taken up English for economic reasons, and in the process, silenced their own languages the better to communicate in a "modern" world? Can the anthropologists who gather and record languages actually end up silencing languages by leaving recordings in rarely-visited sound archives?'

Contradictory and conflicted, silence has many meanings in contemporary society. One minute's silence measures an amount of not-sounding, a marker of falling quiet long enough to denote respect and sacrifice in relation to a tragedy, yet, in theory, not too long to create unease or encourage disruption. This fear of disruption (anxious enough in certain circumstances to warrant the replacement of respectful silence with applause) allows that silence is not necessarily respected, appreciated, or easily tolerated. For many people, silence is an alien condition, only approachable as an artificial, self-conscious pause that interrupts normal life. Seeking isolation in New Zealand, Jenny Diski took a boat trip on Doubtful Sound: 'The high point of the trip came when, in the middle of the captain's broadcast commentary, he told us that the high point had come. Now we were going to hear the "sound of silence", the sound of Doubtful Sound. He asked for all camera clicking and conversation to stop. He turned off the engine. For a full two minutes there was — silence . . . Unfortunately, there was the sound of listening — a kind of buzz of people not doing anything in order to hear what people not doing anything was like, and the sound of expectation, of folk appreciating nature. The silent scream of appreciation gradually transmuted into a silent anticipation of the breaking of the silence.'

An ignorance of language enforces silence: to walk in a foreign city, not understanding the simplest conversation, unable to ask for food or drink without mime, enclosed within a bubble of detachment. During the early days of his stay in Germany in 1936, Samuel Beckett wrote about the pain of being isolated from society as he learned to speak German: 'How absurd, the struggle to learn to be silent in another language! I am altogether absurd and inconsequential. The struggle to be master of another silence! Like a deaf man investing his substance in Schallplatten [gramophone records], or a blind man with a Leica.'

There are few guilty pleasures in a liberal democracy these days, but even so, how often do you hear somebody say that their favourite art form is mime? The art of soundless acting, mime still has a few old favourites: Harpo Marx and Jacques Tati, Benny Hill (in some quarters), the violent wing of the movement — Clint Eastwood and Takeshi Kitano — and then the greats of silent cinema, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton (Beckett and Keaton collaborated in New York in 1965, for the shooting of Beckett's *Film*, but their first meeting was a silent disaster: Keaton preoccupied with drinking beer and watching the ball game on television; Beckett too reticent to break the ice).

The absurdity of mime is nicely parodied by film director Sylvain Chomet in his Tour Eiffel section of *Paris, Je T'Aime*: a young boy humiliated by having to grow up with miming parents. Mime-Boy, the local kids call him, but he refuses to use the invisible car. There have been rumours that Harpo Marx named himself after Harpocrates, misnamed god of silence, but this seems unlikely. One of my favourite Harpo scenes comes from a lesser Marx Brothers film, *Love Happy*. Harpo stands with his mouth open as two men pull an increasingly improbable collection of objects from inside his raincoat: the leg of a dummy, a dog, a block of ice, a toboggan. Then they try to make him talk by using various forms of torture. All this gets them nowhere, so finally they eavesdrop on him as he phones Chico. At first, Harpo uses whistles and a car horn to communicate to his brother. 'Some sort of code' the eavesdroppers agree. Then Chico 'reads his mind', at one point telling Harpo to clean it out; Harpo responds by passing a handkerchief through one ear and out the other. All the time Chico is asking for quiet so he can hear what Harpo is 'saying'. This paradoxical hyperactivity of mimed silence is noted by Michel Chion in his book on Jacques Tati and his famous character, Monsieur Hulot: 'Hulot's notorious silence is not the mime's natural state . . . Tati chooses, however, to make Hulot, in spite of his silenced voice, an extremely talkative character. We notice this in his behaviour, gestures, and even in his immobility. Hulot is constantly correcting his actions, coming back to what he had strayed from.'

Mime can induce a kind of hatred, perhaps best expressed by Billy Crystal's performance as Morty the Miming Waiter, in *This is Spinal Tap*. His memorably cynical line, 'mime is money', is funnier for its breaking of a silence (mimes are annoying for their refusal of speech, but even more annoying when they do speak). For reasons of his success as much as anything else, the symbolic victim of mime's descent into bathos was Marcel Marceau, the French mime whose *Walking Against the Wind* routine inspired Michael Jackson's moonwalk. His history argues for a reconsideration. Marceau learned the art of silent entertainment while hidden with other Jewish children in German occupied France during World War II. His father, a kosher butcher, died in Auschwitz concentration camp in 1944. 'The people who came back from the camps, couldn't talk about it, they didn't know how to express it,' Marceau once said. 'Maybe that has counted, subconsciously, in my choice of silence.' After Marceau's death in 2007, somebody wrote a letter to a newspaper, suggesting a minute's noise, as a mark of respect. Another suggested a performance of John Cage's 4'33", by way of tribute.

## BURROWING

Architect Peter Eisenman, who designed Berlin's Holocaust Memorial to the Murdered Jews in Europe, has talked about the concrete slabs of the memorial in terms of silence. 'I had the idea of silence,' he said. 'What was taken away from people was their ability to speak. I wanted a memorial that spoke without speaking.'

'The art of our time is noisy with appeals for silence', wrote Susan Sontag in her essay, 'The Aesthetics of Silence'. Equally, she could have argued that the art of our time is noisy, period, but there is evidence to suggest that silence as an art statement was anticipated in the late nineteenth century, long before Cage. In 1897, for example, the French humorist Alphonse Allais published *Funeral March for the Obsequies of a Deaf Man*. Though far too literal in its humour to have the impact of Duchamp's later, more sophisticated games with art (or to be humorous), this 'score' of nine blank measures is an early marker of the twentieth-century quest for the white whale of silence, for creation through destruction, for reduction, even for an erasure of history. The gesture was not isolated. Allais belonged to a Parisian prankster group, the Incoherents. In 1885, another member of the Incoherents, caricaturist and filmmaker Emile Cohl, photographed an ear filled with cotton. Noise grew louder, so the choice was evident: to speak out, to scream, to block out, to withdraw into silence.

'Father is gone,' Kafka wrote in a diary sketch called 'Great Noise', 'now begins the more delicate, scattered, hopeless variety of noise, headed by the voices of the two canaries. Not for the first time — the canaries remind me now — I think of opening my door a crack, crawling next door like a snake, and from a position prone on my belly begging my sister and her maid for a little quiet.' To justify his nocturnal writing schedule, he had sent this fragment to his fiancée, Felice Bauer, in 1912. 'The Burrow', written in the penultimate year of his life, fictionalizes Kafka's deep aversion to noise. The story begins by describing an elaborate retreat into security, invisibility and silence within a highly rationalized underground network of passages and chambers. As a sense of complacency accrues, the creature of the story (some kind of mole, we assume, though this is never stated) begins to hear a whistling sound within the deep silence and emptiness of his retreat. 'I did not hear it at all when I first arrived,' says the narrator, 'although it must certainly have been there; I must first feel quite at home before I could hear it; it is, so to speak, audible only to the ear of the householder.'

This is a distinctive characteristic of peripheral or fugitive sounds heard as intrjections: suddenly a sound penetrates and disturbs that which feels safe and still. Again, this returns us to Freud's analysis of the uncanny, and the unheimlich. In the disjunctions between homely and unhomely, in doubling and doppelgangers, automata and animate life, between what was once familiar but long repressed and estranged, lurks the uncanny.

The narrator of Kafka's 'The Burrow' is confronted with an unpalatable truth about the homely, the undisturbed, perfect isolation, stillness and silence — that security is the architect of its own vulnerability. As security increases so freedoms contract. 'I must have silence in my passages', he says, demanding perfection that can only be compromised. He becomes haunted and obsessed with an invasive whistling: 'Sometimes I fancy that the noise has stopped, for it makes long pauses; sometimes such a faint whistling escapes one, one's own blood is pounding all too loudly in one's ears; then two pauses come one after another, and for a while one thinks that the whistling has stopped forever.' Uncertainty lodges itself in his mind, though the narrator's uncertainty is not identical to that of the reader. The burrower grows uncertain about the location of the noise, its source, whether he can trust another creature, whether he was right to design the burrow as he did, whether he can afford to make changes. The reader, on the other hand, grows uncertain about the origin of the whistle. Is it produced by air holes created by small tunnelling creatures or by the digging of a great beast, as the narrator believes, or does it emanate from within the narrator himself? Though considered virtually finished, the end of the story was lost, ending without either resolution or a full stop.

'Everyone carries a room about inside him', Kafka wrote in the first notebook of his posthumous papers. 'This fact can even be proved by means of the sense of hearing. If someone walks fast and one pricks up one's ears and listens, say in the night, when everything round about is quiet, one hears, for instance, the rattling of a mirror not quite firmly fastened to the wall.' This room within a space is critical to the idea of the auditory void of silence. The uncanny silence is not a place of repose, as some audio theorists seem to believe. 'Space, in contemporary discourse,' writes Anthony Vidler in *The Architectural Uncanny*, 'as in lived experience, has taken on an almost palpable existence. . . . Equally, space is assumed to hide, in its darkest recesses and forgotten margins, all the objects of fear and phobia that have returned with such insistency to haunt the imaginations of those who have tried to stake out spaces to protect their health and happiness.' Experiments



with sensory deprivation reveal another aspect of this paradox. In 1968, artists Robert Irwin, James Turrell and Dr Ed Wurtz (at that time head of the life sciences laboratory at Garrett Aerospace Corporation) spent long periods of time isolated from sensory stimulation in the anechoic chamber of UCLA. 'You had no visual or audio input at all,' Irwin has said, 'other than what you might do yourself. You might begin to have some retinal replay or hear your own body, hear the electrical energy of your brain, the beat of your heart, all that sort of thing.' What was most striking about these experiments was the richness of material generated mentally within such a void, and the engulfing hypersensitivity that the participants experienced on emerging back into a more familiar environment. They claimed to have found, for example, that the best conditions for drinking Carlsberg Elephant Beer was when listening to a 650 Hz audio tone. Any slight variations of the tone's frequency would make the beer almost undrinkable. 'Confronted with a severe diminution of activity,' writes Adrian Kohn, 'the ravenous senses recalibrate to detect something, anything, from the dark silent stillness.'

These experiments conducted by Irwin, Tenney and Wurtz are reminiscent of John Cage's now over-familiar story of the short time he spent inside one of the anechoic chambers in use at Harvard in 1951, in which he heard two sounds, despite the total absence of reverberation in the room. One was a low pulse, the other a high-pitched singing tone. Being disturbed by these, he was told by the engineer that they were the sounds of his circulation and nervous system respectively. This is so close to the experience of the mole creature in Kafka's 'The Burrow' as to be uncanny, as if Kafka had struggled with the perpetual disturbance of these same externalisations of interior body processes. One of the key texts of twentieth-century music, sound art, and American minimalism, the anechoic chamber story is almost certainly misleading. Cage may have been hearing symptoms of tinnitus, or spontaneous otoacoustic emissions from his own ears, rather than the sound of his brain at work (or as Susan Sontag put it, confusing the issue still further, the blood in his head). These faint sounds of otoacoustics, produced by the expansion and contractions of hair cells within the outer cochlea, could not be measured until the development of sufficiently sensitive low noise microphones in the late 1970s, so the Harvard engineer (and Cage) would have been unaware of their existence.

The physical origins of the sounds heard by Cage do not affect the sense or impact of the story, but these uncertainties point to an estrangement

from the body. We are left with the suspicion that Cage, ever cheerful and rarely self-analytical, was a less diligent listener to his own body than gloomier, more introverted souls like Kafka, Conrad, Poe, Woolf, Joyce, Beckett and Melville. The conception of silence as an external phenomenon that can be heard (as opposed to 'meaningful' silences that are behavioural, metaphorical, mystical, philosophical or political) presupposes an absence of the body, a neutralisation of space as an active presence. Silence coalesces, aerial yet substantial, from within absorption, a flowing across boundaries: the sound of the listener; the sound of space and the air with which it is filled.

## CONDEMNED TO SILENCE

Sound can be treacherous, rising up despite all suppressive efforts. An infuriating formula applies to quiet sounds: every attempt to create a silence seems to provoke counterattacks of invasive sound. In *Hubbub*, Emily Cockayne quotes a mid-seventeenth-century tutor, who suggested that the optimum environment for lute music was 'a Wainscote Roome where there is noe furniture if you can not let the Company exceed the number three or four for the noise of a Mouse is a hinderance to that Musicke.' As Mr Fairlie discovered in *The Woman in White*, what begins as sensitivity to sound can easily become neurotic; elimination only generates more information. In *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, a two part work published between 1532-34, Francois Rabelais wrote of '... an example of a philosopher who thought he was in solitude, and that, having departed from the crowd, he could now theorize, reason, and write; and yet all around him dogs were barking, wolves howling, lions roaring, horses neighing, elephants trumpeting, serpents hissing, asses braying, grasshoppers chirping, and turtle-doves cooing. In fact, he was in more turmoil than if he had been at the fair of Fontenay or of Niort.'

The solution would seem to be the intensely private soundproof room beloved of the Victorian gentleman, yet such an extreme social withdrawal simply opens the door to ambiguous inner phantoms of microsonic hallucination. Alcoholic adventurer, author and occultist William Seabrook drew attention to these irrepressible peripheral phenomena in his zealously gossip exploitation book, *Witchcraft*. The newspaper mogul, Joseph Pulitzer, suffered from near-blindness and extreme sensitivity to sound. In his forties

he cocooned himself in retreats such as the 'Tower of Silence' in Maine and a soundproof vault in his Manhattan brownstone. 'The elder Pulitzer spent thousands of dollars to have a room cork-lined and wound with silk, cocooned (walls packed too, they say, with mineral wool),' wrote Seabrook, 'but he still heard, or imagined he heard, church bells ringing. And even if he didn't hear outside sounds, it was still a noisy place. His pen sounded like cats scratching, and when he dropped a pencil on the rug it sounded like a depth bomb with a retarded explosion. A vacuum is the only thing that will blank sound completely, and you can't live in a vacuum.' This was the same Seabrook whose autobiography, *No Hiding Place*, describes the persistence of early auditory memories in its first paragraph: 'The sounds were faint yet near. They were the first my memory-conscious ears had ever heard. I had become alive to everything at once — sitting on a warm green lawn, eating bread spread with brown sugar, and hearing the sounds. I liked the sounds best and started crawling toward them.'

Seabrook's sadomasochistic games were described in Man Ray's autobiography, *Self-Portrait*. Visiting Seabrook's New York apartment for lunch in the 1930s, Man Ray arrived to find, in Seabrook's words, something interesting. 'In the middle of the floor sat a statuesque woman,' he wrote, 'like an odalisque, quite nude and decorated with strings of pearls, bracelets and rings. He introduced her as his secretary, but she did not move or speak. He informed me that she was condemned to silence for twenty-four hours but functioned otherwise like any normal being.' Later, when Seabrook's attention was diverted, she confided in Man Ray, saying in a low voice that she would tell the bastard what she thought of him when her time was up. In *Witchcraft*, Seabrook documented an experiment with Aleister Crowley. In 1920, after a conversation about Trappist monks and their vows of silence, they both agreed to suspend normal verbal communication and limit themselves to one prearranged monosyllable for a week. After trying a variety of animal sounds, such as 'urr', 'woof', 'moo' and 'baa', they settled for 'wow' and found that even lengthy, deep philosophical conversations were possible, albeit with the assistance of a gallon of moonshine corn liquor. Based on this experience, Seabrook wrote a short story, 'Wow!', set in ancient China, in which people discover peace and contentment through replacing human language with the word 'wow'; eventually, a second faction emerges, those who spread dissent by using 'wo'. In consequence, two great armies fight to the death over 'wow' and 'wo', leaving nothing but 'a few empty bubbles floating on a river of blood.'

## DEAD AIR

Air and sound are much the same: we breathe the sound and listen to air. Does air persist through time? Can sound transmute into other forms, like fog or condensation? In Georges Rodenbach's 1897 novel, *The Bells of Bruges*, bells are said to sleep: 'They were not entirely at rest, just as virgins are never completely at rest. Their sleep was visited by dreams. He felt as if they were about to move, stretch, moan like sleepwalkers. The incessant murmuring among the bells! A noise that persists, like the sound of the sea in shells! They never empty themselves entirely. Sound forming like beads of sweat! A condensation of music on the bronze . . .'

In *A Matter of Life and Death*, Powell and Pressburger's film from 1946, an angel messenger from the other side stops time. With stasis comes absolute silence. David Niven, in limbo between life and death yet functioning in the living world, rings a bell and viewers of the film realize that sound is absent, the air itself is held in limbo, the universe paused.

## TREMBLING AIR

Rodenbach spoke about bare, empty rooms as 'granaries of silence'. Air is something, not nothing; more than one kind of air, more than one state of silence. 'After a moment I fired the second barrel too', Knut Hamsun wrote in *Pan*, 'the air trembled at the salute, and the echo flung the noise out into the wide world; it was as if all the hills had united in a shout for the vessel sailing away.'

## LISTLESS AIR

'Listless is the air in an empty room,' wrote Virginia Woolf in her novel of the early 1920s, *Jacob's Room*, 'just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker armchair creaks, though no one sits there.'

## PUTTY AIR

Mark Rothko had thoughts about air that are relevant to this reading of silence as a texture, a substance that can tremble or thicken, an event or noise out of which all forms emerge. 'Tactile space, or for the sake of simplicity, let us call it air, which exists between objects or shapes in the picture, is painted so that it gives the sensation of a solid', he wrote. 'That is, air in a tactile painting is represented as an actual substance rather than as an emptiness. We might more readily conceive it if we picture a plate of jelly or, perhaps, soft putty, into which a series of objects are impressed at various depths.'

## HISSING AIR

Describing, with some distaste, the reptilian character of the Galapagos Islands, Herman Melville wrote, 'No Voice, no low, no howl is heard — the chief sound of life here is a hiss.' The bereft image could also serve as an evocation of the suburban sitting room, its undisturbed air that allows the hissing of the ears to rise up into consciousness. To record such an empty, still room, then play back the recording in the same space, will produce an approximation of Melville's Galapagos hiss. The elegant conceptual economy of Alvin Lucier's composition of 1971, *I Am Sitting in a Room*, explored the transformative characteristics of acoustic space by a process of repeatedly playing, recording, replaying, and rerecording a spoken text until the nature of the acoustics (the background) overtakes the foreground of the text. Lucier's articulation of what philosopher Edward Casey called 'the ancient dialectic of place and space' suggests that the phenomenon of cumulative reverberation will happen in any given space, a cloud of echoes inferring infinite space, yet his example begins and ends with himself, seated in a specific place of known provenance, also impregnated with secret history. As David Lynch said, interviewed by Chris Rodley, architecture itself is 'a recording instrument'. In 2005, Danish/German artist Jacob Kirkegaard applied a similar technical process to empty rooms in Chernobyl, Ukraine. These spaces were left abandoned after an explosion in the nuclear power plant in 1986 rendered the area uninhabitable. Rather than add any sound, Kirkegaard simply recorded empty, silent interiors. He then played back the recording into the same room, recording

it again as he did so, then played this new recording back, repeating the process up to ten times. On each repetition, the room hears its own history, fills up with its own intangible volume in a cumulative haunting. Pieces such as *Auditorium* vibrate with luminescent, pulsing density, as if some entity previously indiscernible from the silence of evacuation and radiation had clustered, finally to manifest itself during this absence of human life.

## DAMPENED AIR

'I wish to search out that single sound which is in itself so strong that it can confront silence', wrote Tōru Takemitsu. 'It is then that my own personal insignificance will cease to trouble me.' This might be the single, inarticulate screams of Munch and Bacon, the visceral response of human beings to a godless world, or, the breathing resonance of flutes made from the wing bones of birds, mute swan and griffon vulture (fragments of Pan), discovered in 2009 within the dark granaries of silence of the Hohle Fels caves in southwestern Germany, and estimated to be between 35,000 and 40,000 years old. Music is assumed to begin and end with silence, stated or tacit, emerge out of silence, articulate through silence, and because of this confrontation with the construct of silence, its need to be other, music itself refuses silence. Few musical compositions or performances consist of a single sound, unless that sound is extended through time to become a kind of time or textured air itself. 'Silence is the name of a book by John Cage,' composer Tom Johnson has written, 'and many composers talk about the importance of silence in music, but one does not actually hear much of it in the classical repertoire, or any other repertoire. In fact, silences longer than three seconds are extremely rare in all kinds of music.' Johnson has consciously incorporated periods of silence into pieces such as *Long Decays*, for piano, and *Organ and Silence*. Though clearly related to the repose of Cage compositions like *Prelude for Meditation*, they are more intimately connected to the work of Johnson's teacher, Morton Feldman, and join a lineage that might include Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, Erik Satie, Alexander Scriabin, Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Federico Mompou, George Crumb and Tōru Takemitsu, a secret society devoted to pauses, inhalations, murmurs, implicit and stated silence. 'Silence also inhabits and dampens audible music', wrote Vladimir Jankélévitch in *Music and the Ineffable*.



'Laconic tendencies, reticence, and the pianissimo are like silences within silence. In effect, brachylogy — brevity, concision of diction — is a form of silence in the music of Satie or Mompou. The pièce brève is a silence not in that it emerges from silence, but indirectly, in that it expresses a desire to retighten the grip, a will to concentration. Concision harbours the wish to disturb silence as little as possible.'

In notes accompanying his recording of Federico Mompou's piano cycle of short works composed between 1915 and 1967, *Música Callada*, pianist Herbert Henck emphasises the silence at the core of these 28 pieces: 'Mompou cites the Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross, who invoked the idea of "La Música Callada, la Soledad Sonora" in one of his poems, to express the idea of music that is the voice of silence itself.' This is the complexity of silence, a perpetual evasion of fixity, a constant play of contradiction expressed through shades of difference in every medium, every scene of life. 'I would claim that musical silence is not the void,' wrote Jankélévitch, 'and in effect it is also not only "cessation." Instead, it is "attenuation." Like reticence, or interrupted development, it expresses the wish to return to silence as soon as possible; an attenuation of intensity, it is at the threshold of the inaudible, a game played with almost nothing.'

In early piano pieces, such as *Intermission 6*, from 1953, or *Piano Piece 1964*, Feldman's method was to place sounds within empty space, as if their existence were preordained as sculptural objects, then allow their ebbing presence to linger and melt into air. Tonal gradations, or the echoing impact of a single note in silence, is what matters, as if the music belongs in silence, returning to silence, and what we call the 'music' is simply a degree of colouration dominated more by instrument tone than by the creak, the hiss, the empty room sound. To illustrate what interested him, Feldman invoked Ad Reinhardt, not as a painter of ultra-minimalist, so-called 'black' paintings, but as a master of gradation: '... the gradation of grays, you see, I'm very into that. This is like Ad Reinhardt. You see the gradation. Do you hear it? Are you focussed enough?'

In Yasunari Kawabata's novel *The Old Capital*, set in Kyoto after the American occupation, Sosuke, a weaver, is talking business with a customer. The customer, Takichiro, has brought in a design which he wants Sosuke to weave into an obi. The design, colourful, modern, yet restrained, is influenced by Paul Klee, and this provokes a discussion of the way in which English words such as 'sense' or 'idea', or Western terms for colour, have slipped into Japanese vocabulary. 'I hate it that Western words have

come into such use', says Takichiro. 'Haven't there been splendid elegant colours in Japan since ancient times?'

'Even black has various subtle shades,' Sosuke replies.

## AN EFFECT OF SILENCE

Writing in his *Manifesto For Silence*, a polemic to confront the political and cultural implications of noise, Stuart Sim considers twentieth-century monochrome paintings by artists such as Kasimir Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko, Robert Rauschenberg, Robert Ryman and Ad Reinhardt as visual counterparts of audible silence. The monochrome tradition, he claims, is a return to purity in art, an expression of Kandinsky's idea that abstraction equals spirituality, which in turn suggests silence. 'Reinhardt represents the logical extension of this idealisation of silence with his move to black, but the lack of distraction in any of the monochrome paintings, whatever the colour used, is capable of creating an effect of silence.'

*Manifesto for Silence* was published shortly after another protest against our increasingly noisy world, *The Spirit of Silence*, by John Lane. Noise grows, as does the case against it, since research studies demonstrate clear links between damaged physical and mental health and the excessive, incessant levels of noise now present in society. 'The enemies of silence are twofold', writes Lane. 'First there are the external interruptions to one's peace of mind. . . . the second and more insidious is internal; it is the Trojan horse we have invited into our own lives. . . . the baggage of ideas, beliefs and assumptions we carry around in our minds.' Again, the mirage of silence as purity, a clean slate, yet we need not depend upon the elevated sources with which Lane builds an argument to realize that silence can never be unequivocally on the side of innocence. 'These things'll kill you,' says George C. Scott, talking about cigarettes in William Peter Blatty's film, *Exorcist III*. 'They're quiet,' says the priest. Silence may also be oblivious, indifferent, detached. Max Ernst's *Quiétude*, one of the collages from *La Femme 100 Têtes*, from 1929, shows a man reclining in an armchair. Dozing and dreaming, he floats on a raging flood. Behind him, a sea spout envelops a lighthouse, and by the arm of his chair, the naked arm of La Femme is raised out of the waves.

We may think, with justification, that the twenty-first century is the noisiest era in history, but manifestos for silence are not recent phenomena.

In 1916, an early twentieth-century anti-noise campaigner named Dan McKenzie published *The City of Din: A Tirade Against Noise*. The contradiction of his subtitle highlights one of the problems of such manifestos: though the concepts of noise and silence are valuable as markers of hypothetical absolutes and descriptions of relative states, they remain highly subjective, and so resist adequate definition or placement in any ethical scale. 'Too young to bring about change,' writes Lavinia Greenlaw in her memoir, *The Importance of Music to Girls*, 'we brought about disturbance. Heavy metal was our engine noise — it was trucks on the cricket pitch, bulldozers tearing up the green, boots stomping on flowerbeds, cars driven through hedges, the only thing that could tear a hole in the silence of a Sunday afternoon.' Urgent needs for outward expression, liberty, disorder, sociability and the release of energy all press on silence. Noise may be violent but its interruption raises an otherwise subjugated existence: Iggy Pop's 'I'm Bored', or Public Enemy's 'Bring The Noise'. Noise is so often central to social belonging, the shaping of identity, or protests and injustice, that pleas for silence seem one step from a joyless slide into conformity, passivity, living death. On the one hand, noise is just one of many collateral damages resulting from transportation, construction and manufacturing, all central to the destructive demands of economic growth; on the other hand, noise remains a potent symbol of rebellion and resistance. Given this perpetual conflict, the anti-noise activist faces an onerous task.

## FEAR AND TREMBLING

During my last years at primary school I was persuaded to join the local church choir. Religion held little interest for me at that time, but certain aspects of ceremony could be affecting. The most enjoyable aspect of my short time as a choirboy was the opportunity for collective singing. Most of the hymns were ponderously dull; I preferred the austerity of psalms, sung at Evensong on Sundays, and even the bleak Good Friday service in which music was replaced by plain recitative. The only hymn that made me think about music in relation to the sentiments expressed was 'Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence' — an intriguingly slow and sombre melody of seventeenth-century French origins (given a new arrangement in 1906 by Ralph Vaughan Williams) whose words are taken from the ancient Liturgy of Saint James: 'Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and

trembling stand.' This image of trembling flesh, combined with the obligation to be fearful and silent in the presence of a terrifying God, might have shaken my faith had I actually believed in God. As it was, it appealed to my nascent Gothic tendencies, adding to a suspicion that the dark side had more bite than the light. It seems I am not sole carrier of this particular memory: web research indicates that John Cale performed his version of 'Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence' live at the Emerald City Club in New Jersey in 1980. No doubt bootlegs exist, but New Jersey's reaction to this intimidating dirge is best left to the imagination.

## MY OWN SILENCE

'I want to write a book about Silence [...] the things people don't say,' says Terence Hewett, the writer in Virginia Woolf's novel, *The Voyage Out*. 'But the difficulty is immense.' Books that appeal for silence, struggle with silence, or try to speak of silence, usually confront the problem by calling down reinforcements from those religions that give a high value to silence. In *A Book of Silence*, by Sara Maitland, prayer is a constant thread. Accounts of the Desert Fathers and other religious hermits are considered alongside the journals of mountaineers, explorers and lone sailors. She spends time in search of silence on the island of Skye, in Glen Affric forest, in the Sinai desert, at Quaker worship and a Zen monastery in County Durham, then in an isolated house in the south-west of Scotland. Early in her book, she acknowledges the bias toward religion in writings on silence: 'Before the mid eighteenth century I can find no detailed reports of voluntary silence whatsoever that are not directed by a religious impulse; even when Daniel Defoe wrote *Robinson Crusoe*, based on the real experience of Alexander Selkirk, he took a totally secular event and turned it into a religious work. All the early accounts share a set of particular expectations, rewards and goals, which are bound to strew both the experience itself and the way it is reported.' By the end of the book she is praying for three hours a day, grounding herself in biblical meditation, the discipline of the psalms and other relevant texts. 'I do it for myself, in truth,' she writes, 'but I also pray for others and pray that my silence may be useful somehow in the noisy world.'

There is no doubt that such ardent withdrawing into a dedicated spiritual silence is both inspirational and aspirational for many people who feel overwhelmed by whatever noisy version of contemporary life they

are living. The urge to escape is a complex and paradoxically inescapable component of human nature. In the end, Maitland's book seems more a turbulent account of solitude and its challenges rather than an exploration of silence. Listening is not considered in great detail except as an occasional epiphany. Once again, we must accept that silence has many meanings, not all of which have much to do with sound, listening, or hearing.

'God is silent', wrote Fernando Pessoa. 'That is why we can love the saint but cannot love God.' Lacking religious belief myself, I find there are serious obstacles to accepting the proposition that religion owns the last word on silence. Religions have been silent too often, and on the other hand too ardent in their silencing of dissident views and proscribed behaviour. The illustration on the back cover of Alberto Manguel's *A History of Reading* shows light from the Izaak Walton memorial window in the Prior Silstede Chapel of Winchester Cathedral. Underneath the image of Walton reading by a riverbank, an inscription reads: 'Study to be quiet'. This may be the accepted view of studious reading, the ideal presented by Vermeer, Rembrandt and Maes — a silent, private experience that internalizes the text — and yet as Manguel points out, regulations demanding that scribes should be silent in monastic scriptoria date only from the ninth century. Before then they had worked from dictation and by reading aloud. 'Some dogmatists became wary of the new trend', writes Manguel, 'in their minds, silent reading allowed for day-dreaming, for the danger of accidie — the sin of idleness, "the destruction that wasteth at noonday"'. But silent reading brought with it another danger the Christian fathers had not foreseen. A book that can be read privately, reflected upon as the eye unravels the sense of the words, is no longer subject to immediate clarification or guidance, condemnation or censorship by a listener. Silent reading allows unWitnessed communication between the book and the reader, and the singular "refreshing of the mind", in Augustine's happy phrase.

Religious silences may be instructive but they can never be definitive except for believers. This is why I find Thomas Merton an uneasy read, his piety alienating, even when the charged atmosphere of his close listening is affecting. 'Late afternoon', he wrote in *Dialogues with Silence*. 'The quiet of the afternoon is filled with an altogether different tonality. . . . For about eight minutes I stayed silent and did not move and listened to my watch and wondered if I might not understand something of the work Our Lady is preparing. It is an hour of tremendous expectation.' If I am going to read reports from the far recesses of Christian silence, then I prefer Patrick Leigh

Fermor's *A Time to Keep Silence*, first published in 1957. Through a number of pragmatic, temporary engagements with monastic retreat, Fermor enters with great humility and curiosity into a world he finds both puzzling and beautiful. He writes exquisitely of the sensations aroused by these encounters: 'Their footfalls made no noise and only the ring of the crosier's butt on the flags and the clanging of the censer could be heard across the Gregorian. . . . The anthem was followed by a long stillness which seemed to be scooped out of the very heart of sound. After long minutes, a small bell rang and then the great bell from the tower which told of the rites that were being celebrated and the mysterious events taking place; and the heads of the monks fell as if one blow had scythed them away.' With a discretion that now seems endearingly quaint, Fermor insists that his appreciation of monastic life was limited by some personal perplexity: he lives in dread of any direct enquiry into his own spiritual convictions, describing himself as a possible ghaour (a Turkish term for unbeliever). Despite what we can only assume to be his lack of religious faith, he finds the monasteries peaceful repositories of learning in which 'the troubled waters of the mind grow still and clear, and much that is hidden away and all that clouds it floats to the surface and can be skimmed away.'

There are silences of peace, and then there are silences of complacency, stasis, regulation, piety, submissiveness, secrecy, ostracism, excommunication, the status quo, a deserted town centre after dark, gloomy Sunday, a gated community, suburbia, a cold church pew, people living quiet, respectable lives or suffocating under ennui, shame, embarrassment, inhibition, blankness, boredom. In George Eliot's *Silas Marner*, the linen-weaver, Marner, is suspended from church membership after being falsely accused of a theft. His faith shaken, he moves to another town and lives a solitary life of toil, deriving his only pleasure from hoarding the money he earns from his weaving. Ear filled with the monotony of his loom, both body and soul wither; 'Old Master Marner' the children call him, even though he is only 40 years old. Eliot, always sensitive to hearing in her novels, suggests that the loom's sound is as socially problematic as the weaver himself. 'The questionable sound of Silas's loom, so unlike the natural cheerful trotting of the winnowing-machine, or the simpler rhythm of the flail, had a half-fearful fascination for the Raveloe boys, who would often leave off their nutting or birds'-nesting to peep in at the window of the stone cottage, counterbalancing a certain awe at the mysterious action of the loom, by a pleasant sense of scornful superiority, drawn from the mockery of its



## SINISTER RESONANCE

alternating noises, along with the bent, tread-mill attitude of the weaver.' There are silences of the self, some insupportable. 'The silence depressed me', wrote Sylvia Plath in *The Bell Jar*. 'It wasn't the silence of silence. It was my own silence.'

Resonating loudly within the politics of silence, there are silences of the self, supportable, barely supportable, perhaps insupportable for others, or imposed by others: 'Silent, but . . .' was written by the twentieth-century poet Tsuboi Shigeji, imprisoned twice by the Japanese pre-war government for his left-wing views and tortured until he promised to silence his own antiwar writings:

I may be silent, but  
I'm thinking.  
I may not talk, but  
Don't mistake me for a wall.

Torture can enforce an outer silence, but discourse may continue within.

## THE SILENCE OF FORGETTING

Cheryl Kaplan: 'Ilya, you said that you "cannot look at a painting in silence; inside I am always talking to myself at the moment I am viewing it." . . .'

Ilya Kabakov: 'The artist doesn't come first, the viewer does [. . .] every space has its own strong aura. I feel like a dog, sniffing around, trying to understand the atmosphere. How does the aura speak? It's like a ghost.'

## THE SILENCE OF REMEMBERING

A loss of memory is a silence, often accompanied in old people by a loss of hearing, so as events of the past speak only intermittently, scattered by the cold winds of age, sonic events of the present grow fainter. Loss of cultural memory is a silence, also — the so-called failed states and collapsed ideologies that are treated as mute spectres gathered at the global feast. Ilya Kabakov's work, *School No. 6*, created in 1993 on the site of Donald Judd's Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, is a silent reminder of how memory

## SNOW FALLING ON SNOW

survives in scraps of nostalgia and sharp shards of memory, incomplete scenes and conscious forgetting. In desolate, abandoned school rooms, a dusty violin lies on a bench. As if the children had left music practice one afternoon, then never returned, four red music stands wait for students, along with a flute, a trumpet, a violin bow, faded sheet music, a mandolin fixed to the wall, a backboard leaning against the wall, sheet music on a stand. A guitar lies on the floor in the dust, one more scrap among paper scraps. In the intensity of their silence, a faint music asks to be heard, like the slow heartbeat of a hibernating creature buried under snow.

## SPEAKING TO A GHOST

Like many other prominent Japanese novelists of the twentieth century — Akutagawa and Mishima, for example — Yasunari Kawabata ensured his own silence by the definitive measure of suicide. He left no note after killing himself in 1972, but in an obituary he was quoted with this prophetic statement: 'A silent death is an endless word.' Silences are pervasive in his novels, though they are rarely the silences of stereotypical Japanese tranquility. 'The night scene was severe,' he wrote in 'Gleanings from Snow Country', 'as if the sound of the expanse of snow freezing were echoing deep within the earth.' His characters confront the shades and increments of existence with varying degrees of precision:

'I don't know . . . You can't tell whether it's rain or raindrops just from hearing that it's water, and that it's making noise right now.'

'If rain makes noise it's raindrops.'

'That's not true. The sound of rain and the sound of raindrops aren't the same.'

As with his contemporary, filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu, the placid surface of Kawabata's stories is a thin crust covering emotional turbulence, onerous duty, conflict, and the melancholy of age and loneliness. In 'Love Suicides', one of his masterpieces of concision known as palm-of-the-hand stories, a letter comes to a woman from the husband who deserted her. Don't let our child bounce her rubber ball, he asks, because the sound strikes at my heart. Another letter arrives: their daughter shouldn't wear shoes to school, because they trample on his heart. Then the next letter: she shouldn't eat

from a porcelain bowl, because the sound breaks his heart. The woman breaks the bowl, breaks her own bowl, throws the kitchen table out into the garden, flings herself through the paper wall of the house. 'What about this sound?' she asks. The final letter arrives with equally final demands: 'Don't make any sound at all. Don't open or close the doors or sliding partitions. Don't breathe. The two of you mustn't even let the clocks in the house make a sound.' At this moment, the mother and daughter die: 'They ceased eternally to make even the faintest sound.' The husband then dies, his selfish aim to suffocate what he has denied himself accomplished.

Kawabata's 'Silence', first published in 1958, is a Chinese box of a story, in which successive versions of silence replace each other, snow falling upon snow. At the beginning of the story, a writer plans to visit Omiya Akifusa, an old friend and author who can no longer speak and whose writing hand is paralysed. The narrator wonders why Akifusa won't make more effort to communicate his needs by using some simple code: 'The single letter "w" or "r" might be worth more than all the flood, the truly tremendous flood of words and letters he has written in his life. That single letter might be a more eloquent statement, a more important work.' Taking a taxi for the journey, he asks the driver about rumours of a ghost, a woman who suddenly appears in a car as it passes the crematorium, then sits silently in the back seat and fades out by the time they reach downtown Kamakura. At Akifusa's house, he encounters the difficulties of communicating with a person who understands what he is saying but can't respond:

'[. . .] Even when people are talking like I am now, the present instant is just a sound — "r" or "a" or "m" — it's still just meaningless silence, isn't it?'

'No. Silence is certainly not meaningless, as you yourself have . . . I think that sometime before I die I would like to get inside silence, at least for a while.'

Tomiko, Akifusa's daughter, tells him about a novel of her father's, in which a young man with ambitions to be a writer goes insane and is sent off to a sanatorium. All potentially dangerous sharp objects such as writing implements are denied him. All he is allowed is manuscript paper, so every day he writes: 'Apparently he was always there in front of that paper, writing

. . . at least he thought he was writing. But the paper stayed white.' When his mother visited, he would ask her to read aloud what he had written. Despairing, it occurred to her to tell him stories of her own, as if she was reading from the manuscript: 'She remembers things she had forgotten. And the son's memories grow more beautiful. The son is drawing the mother's story out, helping her, changing the story — there's no way of telling whose story it is, whether it's the mother's or the son's.'

Tomiko finds a parallel between this story and her own situation, in which she has become a mouthpiece for her father. 'But if Akifusa was to continue in silence', the narrator asks, 'if his words were to come from Tomiko — wouldn't that be one of the powers of silence, too? If one uses no words oneself, other people speak in one's place. Everything speaks.' At the end of the story, during his journey back home, the ghost appears in the taxi. She is sitting next to him, yet only the driver can see her. He feels a chill from her presence and asks if he should speak to her. Don't even joke about it, says the driver. 'You get cursed if you speak to a ghost. You'll be possessed. It's a terrifying idea — don't. Everything will be fine if we just keep quiet until we've taken her as far as Kamakura.'

## SHADES OF BLACK

In Ad Reinhardt's beautifully handwritten notes, he returned again and again to words such as 'silence', 'soundless', 'stillness' — in *Twelve Rules for a New Academy* he wrote 'No noise. "The brush should pass over the surface lightly and smoothly" and silently.' But then again, he said elsewhere, 'No such thing as emptiness or invisibility, silence.' Is it possible to say that his black paintings are 'silent', and if so, how can all monochromatic paintings, white, black and all shades between, be equally silent? Standing for a long time in front of Reinhardt's *Abstract Painting, 1963*, in New York's MoMA, staring into its depths, I felt myself passing into an abyss, was forced eventually to look away. The black is not simple black but a grid of squares, a reddish tone in the corners, a cross made up of a blueish-black vertical and a greenish black horizontal; prolonged looking releases this formal structure to the eye, yet the darkness of the painting still induced a form of vertigo. The falling was not a literal feeling, like falling down a well, more passing through the surface into something more complex and infinitely rich. I came away feeling dizzy.

Looking at other monochromes in MoMA's collection — Yves Klein's *French*, Brice Marden's *Grove Group*, or Robert Ryman's horizontal *Pace* — is, in each case, a distinctly different experience. This is also true for comparisons between the varied white surfaces of Piero Manzoni's *Achromie* series, made in the late 1950s and early 1960s. All of them convey varying degrees of activity or energy. His materials shape the beholder's engagement, in one case bread rolls dipped in kaolin, looking at once like a baker's tray but also the faces of worn Neolithic figurines. 'In extending the reach of the achromes in 1960,' wrote Matthew Gale in his essay, *From Alphabet to Zone*, 'Manzoni adopted a variety of materials that were inherently white and thus fulfilled the requirement of neutrality. Cotton was one of these as he aligned square pads, wads or cottonwool balls. Just as with the kaolin achromes, cotton afforded subliminal medical associations.' Whatever these inevitable associations of white dough, white flour, a white apron, white tiles, white uniforms and the silence of kneading or sickness, Manzoni was thinking of white that is nothing but white, a state of pure becoming.

Perhaps because the shadows and dust that passed across Robert Rauschenberg's six white canvases of 1951 influenced John Cage, even opening the way for the active silence of Cage's '4'33" and Nam June Paik's 1964 projection of a roll of clear leader film in 1964, *Zen for Film*, there is an irresistible temptation to draw parallels between monochrome paintings and music. Robert Ryman, who has devoted most of his life to variations on white paintings, illustrates the dangers of this temptation. As a jazz saxophonist, Ryman was attracted to New York by the music scene of the early 1950s. Subtle but busy textures, gradations and an overall simplicity contained within discreet framing devices might imply that he responded favourably to the music of Cecil Taylor, Sun Ra and Ornette Coleman. In fact, what he played and listened to was the tightly organized virtuosity of Bebop. 'They played something you never heard', he has said. 'It was different. It wasn't predictable. [But] I was never interested in free jazz. I was interested in jazz with a structure. It definitely had to have structure.' This is unsurprising, given Ryman's preoccupation with framing devices. His paintings are not spirit, nor voids; his avoidance of colour allows for the sensuality of surfaces to be repeatedly worked, framed and differentiated from the walls on which they are hung in much the same way that bebop framed the expressive variety of its solos, the ingenious substitution of chords and the interpenetrative complexity of its accompaniments within unyielding structures derived from popular songs of the day.

As a silence, white is suspect. 'Insane, enraged white', wrote Henri Michaux, 'screaming with whiteness. Fanatical, furious, riddling the victim. Horrible electric white, implacable, murderous. White in bursts of white. God of "white." No, not a god, a howler monkey.' White returns us again to the scream. Yves Klein's *Monotone Symphony* — *Silence*, originally composed in 1949, acknowledged the possibility that a monochrome could be both reductionism (as little as nothing) and expansionism (the filling of all available space). Once Klein had become known as Yves — Le Monochrome, he used a musical analogy to explain his work. 'The artist used to recount an ancient Persian tale', writes Hannah Weitemeier in *Klein*. 'There was once a flute player who, one day, began to play nothing but a single, sustained, uninterrupted note. After he had continued to do so for about twenty years, his wife suggested that other flute players were capable of producing not only a range of harmonious notes, but even entire melodies, and that this might make for more variety. But the monotonous flute player replied that it was no fault of his if he had already found the note which everybody else was still searching for.' The *Monotone Symphony* was performed on a number of occasions: in 1957 a tape version was played by electronic composer Pierre Henry for the Blue Epoch exhibition at Gallery Iris Clert in Paris, then a few years later by a small string ensemble during a performance of Klein's celebrated *Anthropométries*, held in 1960 at the Galerie d'Art Contemporain in Paris. Directed closely by Klein, naked female models smeared in blue pigment pressed themselves against paper lining the walls, or were dragged across the floor. Seated at one side of the stage (though dressed formally for a concert, rather than naked) the musicians played first a single note drone for twenty minutes, then twenty minutes of silence. This basic formulation of a single noise followed by a single silence mirrored the paintings, in which the white paper was impressed, like those cave painting in which pigment was blown onto an outstretched hand, inscribing both the presence and absence of the human body.

## TO KEEP ME FROM HEARING

Ad Reinhardt was born in New York in 1913. This was the same year that Kasimir Malevich painted *Black Square*, a year before Mondrian began his plus-minus paintings, five years before Aleksandr Rodchenko sent his *Black on Black* canvas to Moscow's Tenth State Exhibition. As a student of



art history and philosophy at Columbia College, Reinhardt met the poet, Robert Lax, and the writer Thomas Merton. They became friends, and though very different personalities, their work shared common interests. For Thomas Merton, Christian devotion was silence itself. At the age of 26, he became a Trappist monk, joining the monastic community at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky in 1941, though Reinhardt tried to dissuade him. All of them contemplated silence and gave expression to their findings through their chosen forms: Reinhardt through painting, Lax through poetry, Merton through writing and prayer. In *End*, Reinhardt wrote:

Nonsensuous, formless, shapeless, colorless, soundless, odorless  
No sounds, sights, sensing, sensations  
No intensity

For Lax, the white page was silence: 'Let the language fall to ashes and poetry will arise', he wrote, and then in *Psalm*:

I listen at night. I listen through  
the day. I can't always listen, especial-  
ly through the day. There are too many  
other sounds to keep me from hearing.

Descriptions of Reinhardt or Lax as minimalists obscure their intentions. Rupert Loydell has suggested 'Intimist' as a better option for Lax. 'Quietist' has also been proposed, though Reinhardt's character hardly conformed to this description. Lax certainly valued silence. Having left New York for Greece in 1962, he tried to re-establish himself in Kalymnos in 1976, but found himself under adverse pressure from the authorities and a minority within the community ('the silent few') in the aftermath of the Greek military junta's collapse. These notes (all written in lower case) were made at that time in his journal: 'big booms today that sounded like fireworks; but they were bombs or cannonades, fired from one hillside to another, making tests. the first sound, or second, made me again decide to pack up & leave, but with the ensuing silence, comparative calm.' As much as quiet, the effect of his work depends upon placement and repetition. Lax's poem for Ad Reinhardt is language reduced to whatever resounds in the reader's thoughts as one word succeeds another in a falling litany, a gentle invocation, and as the eye follows the column of black outlined words down the

white page as if tracing the verticality of a tall skyscraper silhouetted against a winter sky from roof to street level:

Black  
Black  
Black  
  
Blue  
Blue  
Blue  
  
Black  
Black  
Black  
Black  
  
Blue  
Blue  
Blue

## TRANSITIONS TO NIGHT

Encapsulating the combinatory image that is nocturnal darkness, a place and non-place of not-seeing in which no words can be spoken, an underworld of silence, the following lines come from *Hymns to the Night*, first published in 1800, written by the eighteenth-century German romantic poet Novalis:

Downwards I turn  
To the holy, unspeakable  
The mysterious Night.

Stephanie Rosenthal has described the black paintings of Reinhardt, Rothko, Rauschenberg and Frank Stella as doors, transitions, thresholds, or rites of passage that can lead us to the limits of the visible (just as silence can lead us to the limits of the audible). In *Black Paintings*, she writes:

For Sigmund Freud disorientation was the final paradigm of the uncanny, 'the feeling of not knowing exactly what is before us and what not, or whether the place we are heading for might not be where we have been imprisoned all along.' Much earlier, in his treatise *Vom Erhabenen* (*On the Sublime*, 1795), Friedrich Schiller had described darkness as 'terrible because it hides objects from us and thus exposes us to the full force of the imagination.' Similarly, the viewer of black paintings exists in an intermediate state between Outside and Inside, a position that determines how the pictures are experienced.

As she argues, this application of a theory, based on Arnold van Gennep's descriptive term of 1909, *Les Rites de Passage* — those ceremonies that mark transitional states in human life — is not identical in all four cases: Reinhardt's later work can be interpreted as the prolongation of a transitional state of 'not-quite', in which the expectation of complete blackness is held in abeyance, whereas Rothko's black-form paintings from 1964 are a cleansing, an end signalling a new beginning. They draw the beholder softly into darkness, their floating weight of blacks on black an intimate envelopment, and whereas the flat transparency of Reinhardt's surfaces reveals little physical trace of the artist, Rothko's presence is constant, paint and brush evident for us to follow. As John Berger wrote of Vermeer, the material is permeated by silence and stillness.

#### THE UNGRASPABLE PHANTOM

The visible sign of the 'shhh' returns to painting with Odilon Redon's *Silence*, c. 1911, the face of a woman framed in an oval, as if looking absently at a mirror. Two fingers are pressed to her lips. What kind of silence is this; what cannot be said? We have no way of knowing.

Contemporary artists working with sound tend to be preoccupied with auditory absence not as an isolating, spiritual or pious silence, or the silence of purity, but as a haunting, a memory of sound that is pulled back by various techniques of technological invocation, reconstruction or allusion into the present world of forms. I am thinking, to give some examples, of the following: Christina Kubisch's *Electrical Walks*, which use special headphones that can pick up and amplify the normally inaudible electromagnetic fields that proliferate in urban environments — 'absurd

cartographies', Christoph Metzger has called them, '[that] arise out of cash machines, security barriers, neon advertisements, antennas, WLAN, and electrical cables'; Zoe Irvine's retrieval and re-assembly of thrown-away cassette tapes scavenged from city streets; and Louise K. Wilson's *A Record of Fear* project, developed at Orford Ness, Suffolk, in 2005. Between 1913 and the early 1980s, Orford Ness served as a highly secret military testing site and listening station. At various times in its existence, its activities included the invention of radar, drop tests to determine the ballistic shape of bombs, destructive tests on enemy aircraft, atomic bomb environmental testing and Cold War surveillance. 'The wish to incorporate audio and ideas of "aurality" was key,' wrote Wilson in her description of the project, 'since fictions, anecdotes and stories readily circulate around Orford Ness. Aside from the sonic "fallout" from its military testing past, numerous tales of ghost sightings, unexplained nocturnal noises and proximity to an infamous UFO visitation created a desire to privilege sound, and make audible what is absent or intangible.' The present dereliction of the site, stripped of materials that might have saleable value, means that little is left other than empty structures, associations and atmospheres. To draw sound out of this absence, Wilson collaborated with sound recordists to capture the ambient sounds of the abandoned buildings, and with composer Yannis Kyriakides, the hand bells of the Suffolk Guild of Ringers, and a choral group, the Exmoor Singers, who performed John Bennet's late sixteenth-century madrigal, *Weep, O Mine Eyes* in the centrifuge pit once used to test missile components.

In this way, a residue is collected from a ruin, suggestive of its secret past as an eavesdropper listening on a global scale, yet constructing a future from the relevance of the site for contemporary concerns. Piece by piece, fragment by whisper, all these pieces build an emotional relationship with realities that would otherwise escape apprehension.

The elusive nature of silence is best approached obliquely, by stealth. Akio Suzuki's *Pyramid*, created for *Playing John Cage* at Bristol's Arnolfini Gallery in 2005, began as a flat four-metre square of glassine paper sheets. Successive sheets of paper were laid precisely over each other on the floor of the gallery, with each square being one width smaller than the one underneath. So, this perfect pyramid was constructed to a height of perhaps a few millimetres, and in the centre Suzuki placed a small birdcage, and in the birdcage he placed a clay replica of an ear-shaped stone he had found by the sea. This was the mummy inside the pyramid. Completed, *Pyramid*

## SINISTER RESONANCE

lay like a milky tartan skin of carpet rolled out on the gallery floor. This was beautiful, but where was the sound? Suzuki explained: if somebody felt the desire to walk over *Pyramid*, they should be allowed to do so. Some people, he said, would take off their shoes and step carefully, and these people would hear the faint, sighing, friction sound of paper on paper. Others, particularly small children, would be more uninhibited, or less sensitive, and so the piece would be destroyed during the course of the exhibition, in the way that pyramids gradually erode and empty over centuries, either from weathering, plunder by robbers, or excavation by scholars. To discover the meaning of *Pyramid*, its sound and process, required the courage or insensitivity to walk through, to go beyond ways of seeing in order to be a part of the process of making and unmaking, to hear sound within the apparent silence of the piece. At regular intervals beginning with its pristine state, the evolution of the work was recorded with a Polaroid photograph, and at the close of the exhibition, this sequence gave the impression that ghosts had moved across the paper floor each night, leaving fresh footsteps in the snow for the morning: 'Silence but for the imaginary murmur of flakes beating on the roof,' wrote Samuel Beckett in *Ill Seen Ill Said*, 'And every now and then a real creak.' Who knows what it is that we hear; who knows what it means?

Time passes; fixity gives way to destruction; visual perfection is relinquished within the faintest of sound fields. As for the work, this ceremony returns us to nothing, 'to the feeling of not knowing exactly what is before us', so to the uncanny, to the shell-like ear found by the sea, the 'ungraspable phantom of life', the record of a haunting, time regained.

sic