

OF HUMS AND HOWLS:

Gregory Whitehead and Christine Hume

GW *It is not enough to say that you write for the ear --- it is more that you write for the air. So many of the lines in **Shot** crackle and pop like short wave transmissions, creating an experience of reading that is more psycho-kinetic than acoustic, let alone literary: rocking me, riddling me. I'm reminded of the lines from Jack Spicer, the poet as a counterpunching radio, and the spirit of radio jabs through everywhere in these texts, as subject, yes, but even more in the sparking electrical aesthetic of the flow, in the pops and gaps between the pages. Where does your affinity for radio begin, and where (or how?) has it taken you?*

CH I love the sexiness of the radio, the desire it mines via distance, the intimacy of audition, especially in the dark or when alone. But I am a listener. Even when I'm writing (or reading), I am mostly listening to the words as if spoken. My sounds don't channel the beyond or anything but a body.

Some part of my voice went underground very early and a fractured perversion of it sometimes steals through, holds within it the unsayable and uncontrollable. I don't want to recapitulate ancient history—a woman physically possessed and spoken through by the divine or demonic other, in oracular and ecstatic speech—but to speak, actually aloud, was often forbidden when I was a child. While others were having polite conversation, I was digging a ditch for speech. My voice doesn't come when you call or go where I send it. It's haphazard, serrated, bunched, unruly. It is physically interior, like a mobile, leaky, contorted organ. I am thus a bad ventriloquist. I cannot impersonate myself—or a self—well. That's probably why I sound like technology!

I'm writing a long essay on my voice as a kind of ticky blurt, a vital ornament (organment?), an excessive psychokinesis fused to literacy and physical trauma. At some point while I was writing **Shot**, I lost hearing in one of my ears. I couldn't locate sounds; I was lost in their terrifying nowhere-ness. As Beckett says, "A voice come to one in the dark." And it's not always clear if it's coming from inside or outside.

Some of **Shot's** intensity of sonic play and echo might be a performance like trying to figure out what I was hearing, a guessing at and extending of sense. Various mishearings and mondegreens make a composite understanding. Coming back around to your question, I associate radio with night, which is

where **Shot** takes place, and I wanted to be disembodied voice for a hynagogic state. I wanted to be a hynagogic jerk!

“Writing for the air” is mind-bogglingly rich. The abyss is full of air, and air is not nothing. Irigaray brings this to light: air’s ubiquity and all-pervasiveness makes us forget about it. And air carries so much that we can’t consciously detect—poison, electrical hums, radio signals. I’m curious about your writing—do you conceptualize it in relation to air? How do you hear the differences between text and script as you write, or do you?

*GW Writing radio has always been an act of listening to the wind, writing with my ears, though this process is never anything but a guess or an intuition, since there is nothing to be pinned down. The word ventriloquism descends from ventus, which may sound like wind yet means something closer to the belly. The swirls and rips between belly and electromagnetic winds create our human consciousness at the same time they open up into that terrifying gape, and when we enter into that space, as you do so fearlessly in **Shot**, the experience can be harrowing, even life-threatening; no wonder you lost hearing in one ear.*

I, too, associate radio with night in so many vibratory ways, including the mining of desire that you mention, mining alterity and the self into a strange psychic union, out of the dark. There is that lovely quote from Bachelard, “if our psychic radio engineers are poets concerned for the welfare of humankind, tenderness of heart, the joy of loving, and love’s voluptuous trust, then they will lay on splendid nights for their listeners.” Yet such nights are never without risk, on either side of the temporary psychosis of radiophonic pleasure.

So writing-radio nights, yes, and also language pressed underground; my radio life began as an adolescent exploring the town’s sewage/storm tunnels in the hours after midnight, an experience that provided an early sniff of being in the flow of a metaphor. My neighborhood friends and I would sing “spells” down there in the muck, incantations that echoed through the tunnels. We imagined they would bubble up to surprise the town folk during their most private moments, and this remains among my aspirations for radio art.

CH I celebrate the “improved etymology” of *vent* as air/belly, connecting ventifacts and ventriloquy. Jean-Pierre Brisset believed that homophony between different words indicated that they were holding hands underneath the table. To G.M. Hopkins, words that rhyme seek to find one another and live together on the page and in the air. A riff can ring so right.

That's an incredibly mythic story, in the tunnels, and also a terrifically bawdy one — an underground wind percolating up from the bowels of the city to haunt and hector. Did you pass a waterfall of nightmares and condemned wanderers down there? I'm reminded of the dozens of dwarfs coming up from trapdoors in the floor to entertain the guests. They apparently or apocryphally lived in 21 subterranean chambers of Duke Ferdinando Gonzaga's palace in Mantua. Italy.

Or in my own neck of the woods, Mike Kelley's Mobile Homestead at the MOCAD is a faithful replica of his childhood home in Westland, Michigan, except for a basement of bunker-like rooms that can only be reached by a series of metal ladders and uncomfortable tunnels. This is private, destabilizing space —it does not meet any kind of safety code and it does not feel like human space —that Kelley intended for "rites and rituals of an aesthetic nature." As it was being built, a construction worker reportedly got lost, and with no cell phone connection, spent unnerving hours looking for a way out. Underground structures draw us into a space-time cyclone, a perfect condition for spells, memory, and simulated memory. Remember the stories from the McMartin Preschool, where some believed childcare workers engaged in strange, often violent rituals involving witches and all manner of flying as well as sexual abuse in tunnels below the school? That was in the 1980s, it took a hold of Kelly's imagination.

GW Can you say more about your own language, as it went underground? I remember when I first encountered your poems, I had such a strong visceral sense of physical wildness, the far north, wolf howls in the wind; territory that captivates, thrills and sometimes devours.

CH As a child I listened out for a voice that I could inhabit. The hallucination of sound/ voice emitting from text allowed many voices inside, some of them bubble up and then form a kind of feedback loop. As Steven Connor says, the "voice makes itself solid by its self-relation." I feel that relation most intensely when I'm writing (rather than, say, public speaking), and once I tune in, that voice fully seduces me. How do you—as a psychic radio engineer—get through the static? In the midst of a drunk circumpolar whirl, I am verging on hibernation. I'm writing myself into an untidy hole here.

And speaking of the underground, that's the place archeologists look for resonant objects. When I was 12, I developed a hum, barely audible and non-volitional but persistent. Maybe I was secreting a fantasy body, or trying to

rewire my voice, blocking out my family, or simply haunted. It was an underground sound in any case: a volley from the vibratory nether-reaches with the side-effect of alienating any human nearby. No one heard it as embodied intelligence or as extra-semantic expression, as I prefer to think of it now. Before this hum developed, I was raised in the manner of don't-speak-unless-spoken-to. I was accustomed to hearing myself talk silently. Internally language pinballed and simmered, but to answer your question, my body mostly contained my language.

Tell me about the narrative construction of *Potato-God-Scarecrow*; I'm interested in how you contained it via animal architecture.

GW The beaver lodge, as a space of flow, and also as a space of impedance, and sanctuary. I have spent many pleasurable hours observing activity around lodges, hoping if I hung around long enough, mama beaver might wave me inside. And then there is the beaver herself, figure of dispersed intelligence, reminding us that we must think with our tails as well as our brains; and this conception of neurobiology appears to have guts, according to the Damasio and others. In any event, this sort of ambiguous narrative in a flow with widely dispersed impulses and signs, strange hybrid thought- feelings or feeling-thoughts, all moving ahead with an "engineering" whose purpose may remain unfathomable -- that's the only sort of narrative structure that makes sense to me anymore.

CH Yes, entering into Potato-God-Scarecrow stimulates a fully embodied intelligence, if we think of intelligence as it should be thought of in the widest possible sense, to include more somatic processes of knowing and responding, often engined by, as you put it, unfathomable purpose. The work slips in subliminally, with direct access to the unconscious, and awakens our syntactic/ sinew understanding.

Your sonic translation of the beaver lodge is both watery and woven. The architectural hollow of the lodge is what keeps us interested; like you, we yearn to be invited inside of the (narrative) structure. This entrance is damned, unavailable to us, but the space must be maintained imaginatively or our desire ends. We weave connections around a mysterious and deliberate vacancy. Each voice launches an impression; each voice modifies, misapprehends, and remotivates a connection, where connection is a verb. The associative power you call out in your listeners can be startling—I've often taught this piece to students who have never encountered this specialized (but not localized) kind of intelligence. I can't help think of *Dead Letters*, of which, if I may quote what I

have written elsewhere, suggests that how we know things is less rational and more instinctual, in the mode of the auditory unconscious, despite our best efforts. *Potato-God-Scarecrow* though pushes beyond centralizing metaphors and lets synapses rhizomatically roam freely.

This narrative structure mirrors the medium, the void between transmission and audition of radio itself. Here Emily Dickinson pipes up:

To fill a Gap
Insert the Thing that caused it—
Block it up
With Other—and 'twill yawn the more— You cannot solder an Abyss
With Air.

At least one of the formats for dissemination of *Potato-God-Scarecrow* is cassette tape. Archaic and technically inefficient, the cassette tape seems ripe with nostalgic reenactment. The OED removed “cassette tape” from its concise version in 2011. Is the difficulty of the format part—can’t go viral on the internet—of its appeal for you?

GW Oh yes, the same reason I love vinyl, commercially obsolete and thus more fully available for art, though nowadays both vinyl and cassettes are back in favor, so the OED may have to reconsider its deletion. And yes, for my ears, the sorts of linear, seamless ABC structures you hear in abundance on NPR do not ring true to the dispersed and ambiguous spirit of the medium - way too much solder. I can well imagine Emily D. as a late night freestyle radiophonista, playing the gaps to perfection - she would fully understand the sexiness of radio, and everything else.

Extraordinary, your childhood hum - embodied intelligence of the most subversive sort, vibrational resistance, along the frequency range of what you mentioned earlier, “psychokinesis fused to literacy and physical trauma,” the hum that allowed you to survive the Hume? It would seem your sort of hum may share a border with animal howls, as you have such a finely tuned ear for howling; recently you wrote about the “Beau Geste Effect”, where the one simulates the many, a “perceptual magic” also present in your writing. Throughout so much of your writing I sense winds of vigilance, hunger, survival. When you write about wolf howls, it seems so beautifully personal, as if you know that vibrational space very well. The hum creates one sort of fantasy body, and the howl a second, and those two do love to tango, no?

CH I hadn't thought of it until later, but yes, howl and hum taxonomize together, akin also to my daughter's colicky hours upon hours of inconsolable crying, which morphed into years of song, scat, and whistling. These sounds are as originless as Aristotle's she-goats of Cephallania, who "do not drink, as it appears, like other quadrupeds; but daily turning their faces towards the sea, open their mouths, and take in the breezes." When you drink the wind's whipped up urgencies, your lungs are empty. You can't breathe, you can hardly talk. To make a sentence all you get is the air in your lungs, which isn't there. A sentence could be "Stop." Or it could be "Breathe." There is no air. You rummage through the jumble in your head. Let others toss out whatever comes to mind, let them throw out the garbage, throw caution to the wind. When a she-goat of Cephallania howls, it comes from nothing, and it means everything.

These are vibrational spaces of no-origin or clear purpose. They are rhythmic reservoirs that open up meaning way beyond the puny capacities of semantics. They exist outside our economic and exchange systems, and they open up utopian liberatory dimensions. They shock us into an amplified, expanded sense that ricochets around the anarchic and the sublime. A plurality blows through, and the edges rattle.