

Passenger Instrument

The sun had gone but the light remained. The air con was broken. Our shirts damp with sweat. Bitumen became dirt. Rocks pummelled the undercarriage. Up ahead, a red-bellied black snake turned out to be a burnt stick. Behind, in the rear-view mirror, a cartoonish dust cloud, as though at any moment two big brawling figures would tumble out of it. They would tumble out of it with cartoon bruises and broken limbs, their navy-blue coats and white waistcoats torn, buttons and epaulettes missing, wigs grubby and tattered, and we would keep driving, leaving them behind.

Or maybe we would pick them up
take them with us
clear out the back seat and let them sleep it off like children
as we keep driving, like parents or kidnappers

I opened the windows and your hair tried to escape your head. You twisted it and placed it under the collar of your shirt, hiding it from the air. We both noticed the pulsing buzz of cicadas. The sound made the air seem thicker and hotter than it already was. It was thicker and hotter because air is not one thing. In a car it rushes in and swirls around. If only one window is open it makes a throbbing sound, which you said had a name: Helmholtz Resonance, after Herman von Helmholtz, who invented a spherical device with a small neck and hole at one end (which you place in your ear) and a larger hole at the other. When the air goes in it compresses and springs back, oscillating. Depending on the size of the cavity the sound will change. Do you remember when you said this sound had a name?

We were sitting next to each other
on a bus from New York to Boston
and you drew a picture of the device (it looked like a Christmas bauble) in my notebook with an instruction
"See: A Theory of Timbre"

You told me about the cicadas, too. You could not remember if you had seen a documentary or read an article but you asked: do you know about their life cycle, from egg to nymph to adult? I did not. They live for up to seven years underground, sucking on tree sap, coating their burrows and bodies in anal fluids, emerging from the earth like zombies, with jewel-red eyes, abandoning their exoskeleton on a tree or anything vertical by cracking themselves open (anything that cracks itself open to live again, you said, is bound to do something unusual). The cicadas express their transformation when they fly off in search of each other to make a sound no other insect can make.

Well, not a sound but a song
the males sing with tymbals
(you pronounced the word delicately)
not to be confused with the type of drum

Tymbals: ribbed membranes that look a bit like the sole on a sneaker. They are somewhere here, you said, placing both hands on your stomach. Also, the song is not only for mating, they come together because the chorus is unpleasant for the birds that wish to eat them. The cicadas interfere with birdsong. This sonic tactic is not always successful of course (they get eaten) but for the duration of their short lives above ground it is sung in an effort to both attract and repel. It is a song for lovers and for enemies. We were silent for some time, listening. I had never listened with another person as though it was a conversation. We had spoken about this a long time ago, when we lived in New York, do you remember? You told me that when you were young you would make lists in your diary of every thing you could hear at a particular moment. You said that each thing had a voice, its own way of talking, and you tried to listen as if it was one big, continuous conversation. Not babel but conversation. Inevitably you would reach the end of a list and think of all the sounds that you were unable to hear, so you began to imagine them. Soon, as you listened, most things were talking or vibrating for everything else.

Soil hummed for the trees that groaned
shoes whistled for feet that grumbled
the Queen's head on coins mumbled in pockets
that then whispered conspiratorially to legs
your grandmother's necklace sighed around her impossibly soft
neck
which was always silent

What would have been on the list that evening as we drove under a sky that all of a sudden went dark? The headlights poked holes through the night. I said not much further now or something like that but in truth I did not know where we were, not exactly. The more expansive the space the more the night is the night. We had passed a rusted-out drilling rig, abandoned dongas that would have once housed workers and maybe their families, a closed petrol station, a beaten up ute with no wheels, a scrap-metal scarecrow in a hi-vis jacket with a dingo skull for a head. As I drove I got lost in a thought and found you halfway through a sentence, listing minerals on your fingers: lead, iron ore, nickel, alumina, copper, gold, silver, silica, zinc, what else? Uranium, I said. Yes, uranium. What else? Cobalt, I said. Yes, of course, cobalt. But you had run out of fingers. You asked me if it was really true if my great great grandfather—or was it my great great uncle?—claimed to have discovered gold in 1788. He had led authorities to the site and they had found nothing. Threatened with death by hanging, he confessed he had lied. I said the story changes every time it is told, but I thought he was eventually hung, as a blind old man, for stealing a sack of flour. I pulled over to the side, turned off the engine, left the headlights on, and walked away from the car. A cold breeze had come in and it seemed to pass right through me. I stood there for a moment, sensing, I thought, the weight of the sky above my head as if it was a vast and low ceiling about to collapse. No cicadas. In fact no

sounds at all until piss hit the arid dirt with a wet thud. I watched it collect in a dark reflective pool until it began to resemble a hole.

Walking back to the car I thought I saw you
in the passenger seat
your face illuminated and pale
I thought I saw our cartoon brawlers too
their faces purple, swollen, weeping, like overripe fruit

You were telling a story, or maybe singing to them, but I could not hear you.

Tom Melick, 2018

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