

Anna Walker - June 2017

A place to be quiet? It's never quiet! And some memories.

To know 'quiet,' you must be on familiar terms with noise.

I used to live in London, before that New York. Now: I live in the middle of nowhere. But it's not quiet, it's never quiet.

When I was writing my PhD thesis—searching for a particular sentence—I'd put on headphones, play loud music until it filled my body, until there was nothing but noise and bass moving through me. Then I would focus really hard on what was underneath—the thought I was seeking—as I separated from the music, the sentences would take form behind closed eyes, letters dancing across my line of vision, the sound would finally fade into the distance and all would be quiet as the keys below my fingertips filled the computer screen into a semblance of words. I was making sense despite the noise, finding quiet in the cacophony of sound. It was tremendous.

Memory: the word 'tremendous' reminds me of my father. A month before he died it took 2–hours to walk from the chair in the sitting room to the bathroom and back to the bed. All of his concentration was focused on keeping himself upright as he struggled inch by inch across the carpet. I was terrified I had given him too much morphine, that he was going to fall, break or worse—die, and I would be responsible for killing him. It was absurd: my father with cancer, his pyjama–bottoms pooling around his ankles, nodding off on the ugly yellow toilet that he had installed years before. I held him as I wiped him down and then pleaded with him to focus–focus–focus. He barked back at me like a dog, 'woof, woof, woof.' When he finally collapsed onto the bed, I burst into tears—and he looked at me confused, 'why are you crying?' he asked. 'You were tremendous darling, just tremendous!'

I moved to Devon to concentrate on my artwork, the noise of London had begun to encroach. It began as a slow hum, a static—louder than white-noise. Familiar, it had always been there but I had paid it no heed. The sounds of the city vibrating through me were comforting. I'm not sure when it became audible. That's really how the disruption starts, something becomes audible and then you can't un-hear it, the noise invades and increases in volume until it's *all* you can hear. It began to drown out my past—I was trying to remember, needed to remember—I decided I wanted somewhere quiet, somewhere different.

The weather crept in where the city sounds left and the night sky shone with layer upon layer of stars. I was surrounded by green hills and the vast horizon of a briny sea. Space. I exhaled in ways I hadn't anticipated. I uncoiled and then unravelled. It was a process, a city detoxification. But none of it was easy. I thought it would be quiet, but it wasn't, it was never quiet. Not inside, nor outside.

The city had been alive in me for many years. Its smells, overwhelming visual stimulation and its sounds were embedded. One of my lingering memories from the city is late-night

birdsong— to be heard above the daily rumble of traffic, trains and life, birds sing in a higher pitch in the city. Scientists replayed the high-pitched sounds to the same species of bird in the country, their songs were unrecognizable.

In the quiet created by my move to the country, noise began to bleed in from everywhere.

Noise: It's 2012, I am seated in an auditorium in Plymouth, listening to noise musician Merzbow played really loudly. I have a flashback. The past becomes present and the present-present disappears. I am back in New York. The Twin Towers falling, and I am hearing their collapse for the first time, despite seeing them fall over and over in my dreams. In reliving the noise I become aware of the differing qualities and layers of silence into which I had rendered the loudness of the falling towers. Salome Voegelin writes of noise's ability to force an interaction with the trauma of the real: "Noise is the autistic revelation of war, speechless but focused, producing a heavyweight in a fleeting time" (2010: 43). Merzbow's work transgresses boundaries with ferocious dissonance, he describes noise as the "unconsciousness of music" (2004), which pushes me beyond structure, beyond the symbolic, into the realm of jouissance to confront the terrifying and the unknowable beyond. It is sound that forces me to be quiet.

My artwork comes from the quiet amidst the noise, wherever I am, whether surrounded by buildings, traffic and people; or fields, the sea and the stars. It emerges from the noise inside of me, a language fighting to be heard despite myself. I imagine the sound a star makes—it is high pitched like urban birdsong, extends outwards into multiple dimensions and layers of song upon song, melody upon melody, it is every sound distilled into one, it is white-noise and the echo of my thoughts. Millions of years ago I was born of a dead star! So, the noise is familiar. For one of my sonic-pieces, I sought out the sounds of the universe on the NASA website and layered the hum into the work. The sounds filtered through my system triggering memories that had been long forgotten, of a time before I was born.

I thought it would be quiet in Devon. But the past is so noisy.

I am noise, I am never quiet.

December 2013: I am photographing chemical reactions in a science lab at Plymouth University; sulphurous explosions that create a rainbow of reds and yellows. I am positioned behind glass and camera—but the chemicals permeated and burnt the cilia of my right ear. Now, when I'm very stressed, I hear the star's high-pitched call and having heard it, I know it will never be quiet again. Cilia—what a beautiful word. A poem in a word: stereocilia. When I meditate the high-pitched sound moves outside of me, external from my body I imagine it to be the sound of the universe turning on its axis.

The process of making sonic work was very much about discovering the *something* that lay beyond the noise in the quiet. Difficult to verbally articulate, or express through words, the *something* remained unknown until I embodied the violence of the noise; it was only through taking the noise into my body, that I began to understand the qualities of quietude. Simon Reynolds writes about noise as "a wordless state in which the very constitution of ourselves

is in jeopardy” (56), “an eruption within the material out of which language is shaped” (2006: 57).

Regularly, I dance with headphones on—music loud inside me, no one outside hearing or knowing that I am dancing and dancing. They are silly, loud and unfettered movements that move and sway between rhythm and a discordant random grasping at life, a reminder that I am a body that shifts and responds to the noise inside me, I am a physical organism in touch with the magic and mystery of unseen forces at work traveling through me – yes music I am alive! The presence of my moving body invades the stillness, the quiet.

Memory: Once, not long before my mother’s death, she held my sobbing body to her, placed me in her cancer and chemo shrunken lap and cradled me weeping, my tears staining her nightdress. In the last year of her life, we walked arm in arm, sat without the TV on in a darkening room, listening to each other’s breathing, the sound of the night descending. The beauty of that silence after so much noise I hold most dear. In those final months, I would lie awake at night in the quiet, the connecting doors open between our bedrooms, so I could listen to her sleeping, deserting her only when the heat became too unbearable and my heart too heavy at the thought of a future without her. At other times, she filled the silence with her stories, her news and gossip. She gathered as much information as she could about her childhood, her mother, her relatives and passed it on to me, in little-gift-wrapped sentences, filling me with so much, making up for all of those missing years of talk. We caught up I think, we caught the anger and the pain before it destroyed us and transformed it into some sort of understanding. The alchemist Merlin somewhere working magic—we forgave each other. I forgave her for being my mother, she forgave me for being her daughter and in the quiet space that forgiveness left I fell in love with her, her humour, her laughter. Her voice was once strong and pure. She would belt out the hymns at church, croon Irish songs into St Francis’s community centre microphone, but in later years she shied away from singing in public, her hymn-singing voice had grown disappointed. I remember standing next to her at my father’s funeral, loudly singing those hymns in the hope that she’d raise her voice alongside mine, and I think she did, finally, through tears.

*...When through the woods, and forest glades I wander
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze... (Boberg, 1886)*

I am trying to be quiet for it is loud in here, the silence is unbearable, an impenetrable silence that is far from quiet.

Being away from the city created a longing I hadn’t anticipated, for up to 5-years ago I had only ever known cities. Returning to the city creates such a longing for the quiet it is surprising. It remains a conundrum, I am torn between the two.