

# *The Sound of Breathing*

Jazmina Figueroa

The following piece by Jazmina Figueroa navigates the liminal spaces between reality and speculation. Part science-fiction essay, part short descriptive story embedded in theory, Figueroa ties together narratological and theoretical threads from J. G. Ballard's short story »The Sound-Sweep« (published in 1960), Ursula K Le Guin's seminal essay »The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction« (2019), and the recently published work by Jean-Thomas Tremblay titled »Breathing Aesthetics« (2022).

In J. G. Ballard's »The Sound-Sweep,« the protagonist cleans up stray sounds in a world devoid of music. »The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction« challenges the entrenched norms of storytelling beyond traditional hero-driven narratives. Meanwhile, Tremblay argues, in »Breathing Aesthetics,« that labored breathing reflects the unequal distribution of risk in today's world, which is marked by increased air pollution, weaponization, and commercialization. The short story »The Sound of Breathing« connects these threads and tells a narrative around heavy sound sweeping, the rise of ultrasonic technology, and its effects on breathing, as a measure of decline that ultimately is a portrayal of our sensory (embodied) experience on a planet in collapse, where the air becomes thicker and silences those within its atmosphere.

Getting into places was difficult too, however, I'll try to draw them out here as thoroughly and carefully as possible.

A special wood was dehydrated and carved for the purpose of sustaining extraordinary metallic tonal qualities. Once metals are twisted and stretched, their alloying elements are plucked to resonate.

[Notation: At this moment, that fullness bears no fragrance but wood and metal do – made up of properties that change when damp, wet, or rusted.]

Resounding chords ascend and diminish, and in time, a quaver suspends until a single keystroke plucks at its corresponding twine – burgeoning, crescendos, and all over. The flight resembles prickly timbres emanating from a knife gliding atop another metallic surface-thing.

[Interval: Skirt any urge to craft an object, instead, work to bluff perceptivity.]

This wooden surface has survived one place and time. As a series of simultaneous and successive chords, perfect fourths, scales, and their replications, this remarkable thing breaks away from its anchor.

An oscillating theater of permanence and sensation. Embellished inside an era, »and [brought] home with us.«

As cunning as trailing noises moving over epochs and gravel. [A break or snap.]

Fluttering notes, flickering sequences, blazing timber – like scratching.

Pinpointing, piercing sodden earth, *sottobosco* releases some mulchy tinge.

Whatever else arises from corrosion – sheer strings tangle and coil to form a silken sheen above the brush.

Suddenly, a sigh clears the hazy air to an expansive terrain.

Dew, well, any atmospheric performance is also a radiant and conspicuous place.

And inside, droplets fall like notes or characters – abruptly turning over toward another room.

I am supposed to coalesce into or feign a timeworn situation.

— from *Antechamber Music*, 2021

The protest became quiet and still, the leaves no longer rustled. They were just carried around by the wind. Rain fell unaccompanied by a thunderous roar, and occasionally chaos broke out, but it wasn't riotous. A body produces voices, growls, squeaks, bellowing, purrs, hissing, chirps, buzzing, howls, chatter, and so on, but we couldn't hear them. What could be moved no longer made noise. Any awareness of the wind could only be felt like a small caress and without its whistling soundings through grassy fields of grass or nearby tree branches. The sense of sound had changed, and since the onslaught of sound sweeps and ultrasonic technology, listening was obliterated. Now, the air is thick and inaudible.

The early side effect of heavy sound sweeping was tinnitus, which also caused migraines. The sonovac was created and swept away any and all background noise. This sort of silencing sanctification, the absence of sound, is what caused ringing, buzzing, hissing, or other noises in the ears. This ringing of their ears that induced migraines was treated with regular sessions with a *sound-off* device specialist. Meanwhile, ceaseless sound sweeping carried on. The frequent use of sonovacs, designed to clear away unwanted noise, would eventually silence voices over time. Voices were swept right from the mouth. However, with the introduction of ultrasonic technology for faster sound transmission, people stopped caring about having a voice.

The effort it took to speak became too laborious for many. There was no need to process or generate sounds through the manipulation of airflow from the lungs through the vocal cords in the larynx, followed by shaping these sounds in the oral and nasal cavities with the body's innate use of various articulators such as the tongue, lips, and palate – since the rise of ultrasonic technology. The production of speech sounds that convey meaning, which is further enhanced by intonation, rhythm, and other prosodic features was not and is still not possible to achieve with ultrasonic technology. Technology, policy, and governance took sway, which so readily relied on quantitative methods based on manipulated sentiments. Everyone seemed to prefer ultrasonic technology for its time-saving results, leaving communication and exchanges with others to a cognitive process of comprehension, thought formulation, and conceptual transmissions.

I was the only speaker I knew, as in the only person who could use their voice, and I wanted to know why. What determinants impacted this current and alienating space? My fixation grew, since I was no longer able

to tell what something meant once I voiced it. Every time I tried to open my mouth to speak, my breath was obstructed. My ability to comprehend or hear what I said was difficult to discern from my voice. There were no other embodied representations or sources for me to refer to; no one I could speak with, like a fever that doesn't break.

Long after the pacifist propagandistic warnings that led to the suppression of noise, toxicity replaced the ambient noise that once filled the atmosphere, and the impossibility of discerning breathing and sonic characteristics was more common. The air itself no longer moved.

My grandmother, the sister of a defamed Metropolitan Opera House singer, led a loud and resounding protest after her sister's public betrayal by a top ultrasonic record label company. The media portrayed my grandmother and her sister in a derogatory, slanderous manner, likening them to having the candor of banshees, associated with wailing and bad fortune, simply for insisting on the importance of vocalization. My grandmother later went on to be a poster child of the bigger issues arising from the incessant use of sound sweeps. She warned us about the existential threat to the experience of being human, »We need all possible sensory registers, drifts, and import-exports. These are the driving force of life,« she once exclaimed during a rally, »there are no technological fixes to our social problems!«

By the time of my grandmother's death, the anti-sound sweep movement had dwindled. She was portrayed as a tyrant and thoroughly smeared by major ultrasonic industry campaigns for attempting to incite revolt and chaos.

Our DNA defines us to some extent, but breath is what sustains us. Before the sound sweep, the air was usually only associated with nasal passages and sensory connotations like smell. A sense of the world that is lived and made vulnerable by the atmosphere. And while the temperature declined, causing the clouds to form and settle over the hills, and the sun fell behind them each night, the thick layer of haze was noticeable on that horizon, the constant blurry and heavy density of the air. This haze is the air that muffles a voice, this sort of airflow when it enters the body makes it especially difficult to produce sounds using vocal cords.

I never understand why someone wouldn't keep a memento, *mə 'men, tōs – kēēpsakes* – making 'in, deks. Often, I try to remember how things sound by outlining the vowel and consonant arrangements of the word.

Acknowledging the significance of pronunciation, which is likely attributed to my own recorded history, my mementos consist of a family archive of sound recordings dating to my grandmother's youth before the sound sweep. Maybe it's a grounding practice, tuning in from the newfound era of loud silence, and feeling like I've never really had ground to stand on in the first place. Without the voice, all that we can do is observe.

My grandmother's voice is played on a digital file of a voice note she once sent to a friend:

I only ever hear cars in this city, their alarms, police sirens from time to time, and the sound of tires moving over asphalt and cobblestone. I supposed that type of noise is what reminds me that I am in this bustling eternal metropolis. When I'm walking around aimlessly here, attempting to take in the scenery, I'm mostly just looking out for cars – the hotel is lovely, a room with a view over Rome's rooftops. On the fourth floor, I'm often visited by chirping birds fluttering their wings excitedly. It's also very bright here in the mornings, despite the smallish windows in my room.

In the background, the noises from the street are also audible from this MP3 file. Suddenly a car horn breaks up the city's white noise as the driver, obviously annoyed at some hold-up, presses on their horn for what feels like three minutes. I can feel his fervor and the annoyance he caused others – maybe keeping these mementos is affecting me, moving me toward anger. I am haunted by the question of why I still have a voice, even if I barely know how to use it.

In silence, the way light travels over surfaces becomes discernable. There never seems to be enough light because of the toxic haze that fills the still air. I could alter the stillness of light if I am deliberate in my movements, deep breathing, and mental focus, and shaping a different configuration of myself, the air, and the space. Similar to ways that the moving car tires over asphalt rattled the windows of my grandmother's hotel room in Rome.

The days are let go by the light and the night does what it does, a new configuration forms. With all my might and effort to conjure the ability to move the air forcefully, I begin to speak, sing, and shout around. I fill up the night with what was swept away.

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