

REED

I have soaked the reed in water for approximately 45 minutes. Now I place it across the rim of a small ceramic pot. My idea is that the pot could serve as a resonant chamber to catch, and possibly amplify, any ensuing sound. I wait. After about an hour, I begin to pick up unmistakable sounds of crackling, varying from the faint to the barely audible. Each sound can last for no more than a tiny fraction of a second, and to me it seems over before it has even begun. The cracks are scattered at irregular intervals. Sometimes there is a long gap, at other times a lot come at once. Some are high-pitched, others lower. I have to lean close to the pot to hear them, but the very effort of straining my ears makes me more than usually attentive to other sounds, normally consigned to the background, but which now seem so voluminous as to overwhelm the crackling I am listening out for. There are sounds from afar, of birdsong, traffic and children playing outside. But there are also sounds from within, of my own breathing, my intestines, my pulse, and the incessant buzzing in my ears.

It reminds me of how I have sometimes lain awake at night, hyper-alert, worried by soft clicks and creaks that seem to issue from tucked-away corners of the house such as the attic, floorboards and doorframes. These are corners where dust settles, and where spiders spin their webs. Silent by day, undisturbed by the hustle and bustle of quotidian life, their clicking and creaking sets in only after dark, when the rest of the household is asleep. If the creaks register the rattle of draughts on doors, the clicks often turn out to come from hot water pipes, as they gradually cool and contract. At first, they are frequent and regular. But as time passes the intervals between them lengthen, and their intensity diminishes. I wait with mounting anxiety for the next click, and then I wonder whether I have even heard it. It becomes a question of which can hold out longer, my wakefulness or the pipes' contractions. Usually the pipes win, and I am asleep before the pipes ever finish - *if* they ever finish. For in truth, the curve of diminishing intensity tends towards zero, without ever reaching it, while the series of ever-extending intervals approaches the infinite.

As with the contracting pipes, so with the drying reed. Though nothing can be seen, I suppose the cracks must be the sounds of shrinking, as the organic fibres microscopically adjust their alignment. Of course the reed is no stranger to water. It had once grown in the marsh, before being cut into lengths and trimmed, gouged and profiled in preparation for its eventual reactivation by the lips, breath and saliva of the bassoonist. Now, as it rests - apparently impassively - on the pot, it is slowly drying out. But will it ever be completely dry? And how can I ever know which crack will be the last? After many hours, the cracks become few and far between, yet just when I'm thinking they are finished at last, there's another one! It was so faint I could hardly hear it. But that only raises further questions in my mind. How can you hardly hear a sound? There can surely be no two ways about it: you either hear it or you don't. There must be a limit. But is the limit a threshold you cross or a zone you inhabit? Might the same question even be asked of sleep and wakefulness?

It is a question of liminality. The anthropologist Paolo Maccagno has explored this question in the context of running the marathon.¹ Typically after around 20 miles, runners hit a limit of endurance which they liken to a wall. If they are not to crash into it, and suffer physical collapse, they have to cease all thought of crossing it in order to reach the finishing line on the other side. Rather, they have to *inhabit* the wall, to let it open up from the inside into a current that runs not from start to finish but indefinitely, rather as the river runs between its banks. To inhabit this liminal condition is not to be halfway there, suspended between points of departure and arrival; it is rather to swim in the midstream, buoyed up by the current itself. This is not an option, of course, for spectators who have come along to watch the race, and to cheer the contestants at the finish. From their perspective, everything is black and white: you have either finished or you have not. But for the runner, there is no finish, no ultimate destination. As in life, you have no option but to carry on.

What if we were to apply this same perspective to hearing? We tend to think of sound as if it were packaged into discrete energetic and informational quanta that are sent across - literally *transmitted* - from source to recipient. We listen intently from start to finish, hoping to pick up, and decode, the meanings they convey. If you were a telegraph operator, intercepting a message in Morse code, it would indeed be vital to register every click, lest the message be garbled. Were the clicks to cease prematurely, you would face what would seem like a wall of silence. Nothing would come through; all contact lost. Drying reeds, however, have no information to transmit, nor do the contracting water pipes in my house. No final click, like the last unit of code, will complete the message. The reeds and the pipes are simply doing their thing. Every crack or click, then, is not so much a quantum of sound, wrapped up in itself, as a prick in the fabric of the auditory field. And to hear it is not to receive the sound, ready-made, but to make it out, as we might make out the light of a torch in darkness.

In making things out, we cease to be spectators or auditors in a world in which there are things to see and hear only because they have already settled into fixed and final forms. We find ourselves, instead, immersed in the current of their formation. In this current, eyes and ears are no longer the organs of a body primed for the receipt of visual and auditory stimuli. Rather, the body itself is entirely given over to the stretch of attention by which we reach out to things and touch them. It becomes - as we say colloquially - 'all eyes' and 'all ears': not a body with eyes but an eye-body; not a body with ears but an ear-body. Listening for the cracks of the drying reed, or the clicks of contracting pipes, I find I am not so much facing a wall of silence as inhabiting it. It is a silence that opens up, from the inside, into a world undergoing perpetual birth. To 'hardly hear', then, is not to be halfway between hearing and not hearing, as if that were possible, but to draw one's awareness upstream, to the very moment of incipience wherein sound is born from silence.

¹ Paolo Maccagno, 2015. *Lungo lento. Maratona e pratica del limite*. Macerata: Quodlibet.

This is a moment of heightened expectation, and it carries on like the crest of a wave. Am I, then, awake in this moment, or asleep? Again, I am neither. Inhabiting the wall of silence, ever-present in the birth of sound, I have - just like the marathon runner, or like the waters of the river - entered a condition, of reverie, which flows forever in between. In this condition I no longer wait for the last click. I just go on listening. And with my attention diverted from the finishing line, I find I'm hearing all sorts of sounds that I had never noticed before. All around, things are coming to life, as they once did for the reed, growing in the marsh. A plant of neither dry land nor open water but the in-between, its roots reaching into the earth and its stem and leaves into the sky, the reed defines what might be perceived, from the outside, as a threshold. But for the reed the shore is not a boundary between wet and dry but a zone of habitation. And so it is now, as the reed and I together inhabit the zone where silence gives birth to sound.