

Something Like the Sound of Wind in the Trees

by Bruce Holland Rogers

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1. White Noise

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I'm not sure. Maybe it was the sound of sand hissing against the windowpane. Maybe it was tires on a wet road. Maybe it was the sound of paper tearing. Maybe it was the sound of water almost boiling. It might have been a distant river or the sound you hear in a seashell or a jar: the sound of space contained.

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2. When the Phone Rings at Three in the Morning

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You wake up with your heart hammering away, but your jaw and tongue are still numb with sleep. You say hello, but there's nothing there. Well, there's something. There's the hiss of the wires. You say hello again. Hello? Hello? But with your tongue so sluggish, it's coming out instead as hollow? hollow? That sound of an empty line, the hiss and buzz and occasional crackle, is more empty than silence would be. More absent. You fumble the receiver into its cradle, and a moment later, the phone rings again. Still, no one. Very insistently, no one.

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3. The Ovation Lasted a Long Time

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After the second encore, the musicians had left the stage, returned, gone away again, returned, and exited for the last time. But the applause did not die down. Finally, one by one, the members of the audience grew tired of clapping and stood to leave, but the sound of the ovation still hung in the air. Even when the last person had left the auditorium, the sound persisted like the rush of a waterfall. It remained when the building manager went home, it had not diminished when he unlocked the place in the morning, and it was still there even when another ensemble arrived that afternoon to rehearse. Perhaps, the building manager told these musicians hopefully, the sound would die down by the time of their performance. But it did not. Their music sounded thin and gauzy through the echo of the previous night's applause. Many in the audience demanded their money back. When the manager cancelled the next two performances and hired a team of acoustical engineers, they installed foamrubber baffles and hung strips of carpet from the walls. These measures seemed to dull the enthusiasm of the applause somewhat, but they could not erase or absorb the sound completely. The place was now useless as an auditorium. The season was canceled,

the front doors boarded up. For a time the building was vacant. Finally, the owners converted it into a warehouse. The fork-lift operators complained about the relentless ovation as well as the sloping floors, and they frequently went on strike. Even so, storing dry goods made more money for the owners than the music ever had.

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4. Caribbean

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In the parking garage, April fell asleep in her car, dreaming of islands with white beaches. Her engine ran. Carbon monoxide crept around the door cracks, slithered in through the ventilation. She kept sleeping. The gas was colorless and bland. It had no sound of its own, but it borrowed the sound of the ventilation fans, the sound of the sleeper breathing. In her dream, April felt the sea breeze in her hair. Her arms and legs grew heavy with sunlight. The waves rushed ashore, one after another, turning to foam with a hush, hush, hush.

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5. She Wasn't There When It Happened

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Sheila's lover, Ben, died of a heart attack in the street in front of their apartment. It was the old coat he wore that killed him. When he slumped against the side of a parked car, no one would help him. They thought he was a bum.

Sheila wasn't there when it happened, but she could imagine how it must have been: Ben curling forward, his hand reaching out of the coat's frayed sleeve, strangers shifting their gazes so that they could step around him without seeing him.

She tried to get on with things at work. She sent Ben's things to his family. In short, she held together.

Once, passing the spot where Ben had died, she heard a sound like the whisper of leaves in the wind. But there weren't any leaves.

It's nothing, she told herself. She went in, made dinner, and switched on the television. But in the morning, the sound was there again. She heard it on the street, in the subway, at work.

She tried to ignore it. She tried to pretend that the louder and louder hiss didn't exist, even though at work she had to ask people to repeat things.

The next morning, in the subway car, the sound intensified until it was like strong wind in her ears. Sheila looked up and saw flecks of light dancing across the faces of the passengers. It was as though silver confetti were falling right in front of them, glittering. As she watched, the confetti fell faster and thicker until the faces of those around her were like television screens tuned to an empty channel. She stared.

She missed her stop. She rode to the end of the line, where people suddenly had their faces back, and the sound fell off to a whisper. Because she didn't know what else to do, she went to work, but she spent the day avoiding people.

On the walk from the subway to her apartment that night, she came to the place on the sidewalk where Ben had died. The sound had stopped. There was no rustle or whisper or hiss. There were just the street sounds, shoes scraping the sidewalk around her, cars passing.

Sheila was too tired to take another step. Her knees felt weak, and her eyes burned. A sound started out of her. Her shoulders shook.

On either side, people shifted their gazes half a degree so that they could step around her without

seeing her.

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6. Insomnia Cure

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When his parents fought, Walter would turn on the old record player in his room and drop the needle on the empty spot after the last song. *Psshhhhhhhhhhhhhhh-pop*, it went. If he could hear their voices, he would turn up the volume: *PSSHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH-POP*.

PSSHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH-POP. Filling the room up with the absence of music.

Thirty years later, after his own divorce, he keeps a record player in his room. Some nights, the absence of music at full volume is the only thing that will get him to sleep.

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7. The Ultimate Mood Maker

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In the new house, Jerry had trouble sleeping. As he stared at the dark ceiling, listening to Carla breathe, there were things that weighed on him: The job at the planner's office that had once been his dream and was now drudgery. The mortgage, which meant-- even with Carla's income-- that he needed to keep the job. Carla's difficulty conceiving. What if they kept trying and she didn't get pregnant? And what if she did? Worst of all was the thought of not getting enough sleep, of what it would do to him the next day. His fear of insomnia sometimes kept him awake all night.

The recorded sailboat sounds were Carla's idea. "The house is too quiet, that's the problem." She bought the recording from a mail-order company called The Ultimate Mood Maker. They specialized in recorded waterfalls, rivers, cornfields, and rain forests-- she could have bought a whole library of restful sounds. But she bought just the sailboat.

It worked wonderfully at first. With the stereophonic waves breaking on the bow, with the gentle purling of the wake astern, with the occasional luffing of the sails and the creaking of the mast, Jerry felt the whole house gently rocking him, carrying him away to a place where the job and the mortgage and his insomnia just didn't matter.

But after fifty minutes, the recording would end and Jerry would be wide awake, staring at the ceiling, wondering if maybe he should have chosen an adjustable interest rate. After a while, he'd get out of bed, start the recording again, return to bed, and drift off into another fifty minutes of sleep.

Carla's solution was to buy more copies of the recording and set the stereo for continuous play, and Jerry finally began to sleep through the night. In fact, he found the sound of the creaking decks and splashing waves so comforting that he began to leave the recording on all morning. On the days when he was the last to leave for work, he left it playing so that the sounds of the waves were the first thing he heard when he came home. Soon Carla, too, was leaving the sailboat sounds playing around the clock. With the sound always in the background, Jerry sometimes felt, even wide awake at the dinner table, that he could feel the house gently rocking.

There were hints of the coming transformation, but they were too subtle to be alarming. When a crust of salt repeatedly formed on the front doorknob during the day, Jerry thought it was curious, but not inexplicable. After all, it was winter, and there was plenty of salt about on the roads and sidewalks. When the air inside the house began to smell distinctly of kelp, well, that was surely just a case of suggestion, Jerry reasoned. If you hear the sound of a sailboat all night long and for much of the day, you begin to imagine the smell of the sea, just as the feeling that the house gently rocked on the waves was an

illusion.

On the morning that Jerry opened the front door and saw, not his front walk, but blue waves stretching to the horizon, his feet had already started down a path that was no longer there. He stepped into the sea. The weight of his water-logged suit nearly pulled him under, but he managed to grab onto the rose trellis and pull himself back onto the front stoop.

For a long time he sat there, dripping, looking out at the sun-flecked waves. He should be worried, he knew. There were many things now to worry about. But the sound of the waves lapping gently against the aluminum siding, the sound of the house creaking as it turned slowly in the current, these comforted him almost beyond belief.

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8. When You Let Your Head Slip Under the Water

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It's been a tough day. Well, when was the last time you had a day that was easy? But for once you're taking care of yourself. For once you're up to your ears in hot bathwater, and you've taken the phone off the hook. You relax and let most of your head slip under the surface. The water has a sound to it, a warm, cottony, muffled sound. Eyes closed, you hear yourself breathing, but distantly. There are clicks and tappings in the building, things you don't ordinarily hear. Life in the womb must have been like this. This is the sound you came from. You stay until the water grows cold, and when you open your eyes, your knees surprise you like islands sighted after a year at sea.

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9. White Noise

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I think it was the sound of my grandfather's last breath amplified many times over. I think it was the sound of a gunshot played back at quarter speed. I think it was rain. I think it was the sound of swimmers dividing the water. I think it was the sound of wind in tall grass or the sound of a brush fire. It was the sound of three degrees Kelvin, the sound of snowfall, of ashes stirring, of smoke rising up on the cold air.

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