

Excerpt from:
An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Hong Kong (After Perec)

Excercises for Listening

Issue #1

2018

Cleaning lady
pushing cart
along.

Rustle of
trash bag
plastic on
plastic.

Vacuum cleaner
rolling across
concrete.
The two women
converse.
Mystery language
to me.

Students off
in the background
soft voices
white skirts.

11.10
school bell
what does that
mean?
Nobody seems
to react.

Stream of traffic
buses, cars
a squeaky
bike.
Back-up signal
pierces the
noise.
Squeaking brakes
time and time
again.
Like mechanical

birds on
the breeze.

Ears hissing
my undercurrent
of noise
rush of
blood.

11.15
signal bell
again
no one reacts
again.
Race to
nowhere.

Cleaning lady
returns
plastic wheels
over tile.

Motorbike like
giant mosquito
buzzing by.

Resonating here
the voices
the world
outside.
Like sitting
in a giant
ear.

And sometimes
it all ebbs
practically to
silence.
Or what
passes for.

Steady breeze
blowing through
the courtyard
vibrating leaves
I have to imagine
their sound.
Moving silently

they give shape
to the air.

The bathrooms
are just
around the
corner.
People move
across my field
of vision
mostly quietly
but this one
girl claps
and sings
a melody.

Voices well up
somewhere behind
bodiless until
two women
walk by.

Unique sonic
events
too many
to note.
Time passing.

A machine starts
to hum
like a giant
insect.
Sonic worm?
Burrowing its
way through
the mid-day.

Someone calls out
„hello.“
First word
I can
understand.

Gray hum
best I can
describe it
further off
in the

hall.

Paper blows
across the
courtyard
gentle scraping
along the
concrete
floor.
Instead of
leaves.

Every once in
a while
toilet clanks
down
that hard
porcelain
sound
brittle like
white.

Finally, the
first siren.
Been waiting
for this.

Students getting
louder now
brief spate of
excited voices
a bit of
yelling.
Good for
distraction.

Two buses
pass by
front and
back.
Stereo image
of time
passing in
sound.

Plastic bottle
empty and
crinkled

rolls across the
concrete.
I can hear
music.

Now a girl
is kicking that
same bottle
around.
But the music's
gone.

Wow! two
wooden sticks
smacked together.
Like small
explosions
counting in
time.

What to listen
for when
it seems there
is nothing to
listen to.

Someone's switched
a radio on.
Tinny music
fighting to make
itself heard
above the din
(as quiet as
that may be).

Door bang shut
like a giant
drum.
Big suck of
air.

Coming back from
the bathroom
with all its
water running
and dripping
the world outside
seems lost in

silence.
Time to re-adjust.

The sound of
heat and humidity
like a stasis
thick air
all the tiny
noises
coalesce
and melt
together.
A slow
storm.

Keep coming back
to the hissing
in my ears.
Mountain stream
or am I
just dreaming
of refreshment?

Mid-day sun
fills the courtyard
white light
blaring
bleaching out
my ears.

Now the table
saw makes
its presence
known.
But only for
a second.
Still, a welcome
relief in all
this sameness.

First time to
hear a car
horn?
Or is everytime
the first
time?

I see a small

bird hopping
around
but surely
I will never
hear her
song.

The table saw
again
more persistent
cutting through
the afternoon.

In reaction to
the saw
kids seem
to be getting
louder.
They must have
a lot to
laugh about.
That carefree
student
life.

12.05
bell rings again
digital Big Ben
without the
strokes.
Well, this used
to be the
empire here
once upon
a day.
All the kids
break for
lunch.

Departing voices
excited to leave
their work
behind.
What will be
left in
their wake?

Kid brings a

bench back
I expect a
loud bang as
he sets it
down
but, no!
just a gentle
nudge across
the tiles.

And another
vacuum cleaner
moves in
leaving no trace
of the work
done.
Its drone too
vanishing on
the breeze.

Mid-day flurry
of voices
slowly eking
away.
Every now and
again, though,
some heavy
slamming
going on.
Wakes me up
from near
sleep.

Girls walking by
together on their
way to the
bathroom.
Arm over shoulder
giggling the
whole way.

Something sub-sonic
outside the gates
to the school
huge vehicles
lumbering by.
Mirrors cloud
drift and

shadows falling.

With one last
door slam
it seems
everyone
is gone.

Traffic
air moving
approaching
the black
hole.

Suddenly, pushing
a cart through
the courtyard
loud like a
freight train
passing.

A bird flies
by in its
wake.
How quiet can
it get?

The steel entrance
gate crashes
closed.
Strange, I hadn't
noticed this
before.

Suddenly all the
machines humming
the fans whirring
air conditioner
blasting.
It all comes
into view
now.

Trying to listen
deep, as far
as my imagination
can go
stretching out
into the city
gathering in all

that I've heard.
Still, this can't
really fill
the void.

Little birds make
their entrance
I can actually hear
their chirps as
they peck for
food on the
barren courtyard
floor.
May be the loudest
sound I've
heard today.

A steady squeak
rips me from
half-slumber
thank you!
But what is
this sound
and why do
I always
want to know
the cause?
Does this change
the sound in
my mind?
A voice is
a voice?

Paper cup
pendulum swing
back and forth
across the
floor.
I know it's
making a sound
but I can't
hear it.
Imagine it?
what good
would that
do?
In my mind
anything can

happen.

Brakes squealing
like giant
birds flying
by.
And further along
outside, maybe
a real bird
something tropical
whooping and
hooting.
Big old tough
city species
clear as a
bell.

I imagine nails
across a giant
blackboard
big as the
sky.
Vapor trails
screeching across
its surface
clawing to
the horizon.

Famished now
it seems the
loudest thing
I hear is
my stomach
grumbling.

14.05
back from lunch
the school is
completely quiet
it seems.
Wind had kicked
up but I
still can't
really hear it.
And the birds
now making their
presence
fully known.

Amidst backdrop
of siren and
scooter and the
afternoon slowly
idling along
towards evening.

Across from me
a classroom
students sitting
inside.

I imagine their
voices, see them
gesticulating
but the glass
doors to
the classroom
are shut
as are all the
sounds from
within.

Only imagination
at play
again.

At most times
today, from
somewhere deep
in the bowels
of the school
unseen but
not unheard
things banging
around

Bam!
Shattering the
afternoon
competing with
the roar of the
trucks outside.
Not sure which
I like (dis-like)
better.

14.15
bells again
signaling for
nobody

but with that
a voice fills
the courtyard
also talking
to no one.
Maybe only
for me.

14.20
another signal
short echo
and it's
gone.

The gardener
walks across
my field of vision
water dripping
from his
can.
But his footsteps
are louder
and even at
that
still really
quiet.
Waiting for
the storm.

Big, heavy table
shredding across
concrete.
This time visible
and also
violent.
Like someone
tearing up
the floor.

A gray curtain
hangs over
everything
this residue of
all the surrounding
sounds, slowly
decaying in the
resonance of
the space.

It's hard to
get around
this.

Outside I imagine
the ocean
and not a
road
water flowing
crashing up
against the shore
and not cars
driving by.
The buses could
be ships
passing in
the night.

When the sun
comes out
from behind
the clouds
it seems
everything gets
louder
levels boosting
until a cloud
bank sets in
again and
with the
falling shadows
a sense of
quiet returns.

Some events
don't even seem
memorable enough
to write about
like the click
of the classroom
door, but
what doesn't go
into this day's
fabric?
What doesn't
belong?

How much can

we get out of
a space?
This could go
on forever.
Maybe this already
is forever.

Muffled cries
come from the
darkened classroom.
A film is being
shown.
Or are the
students quietly
screaming?

I love these
moments of
what seems like
complete [relative]
silence
when the bottom
drops out.
A low pressure
void leaving
us hanging
in the balance.

Clanking porcelain
another big piece
of furniture
crashing
like the
sky were
falling.

The cleaning lady
comes and goes
making her rounds
rustle of plastic
trash bag
creaking wheels
the gentle
pitter-patter
as she hobbles
her way from
bathroom
to bathroom.

When I close
my eyes
it seems like
everything is
happening right
inside my
ears.
Does all
sound really
come from me?

A bag of cans
clattering together
more music
to my ears.
I could wait
all day for
these moments.
Luckily, I don't
have to.

Changing my seat
sitting between two
poles of traffic
a stereo image
pulling me
this way
and that
as the cars
come and go.
The afternoon
stretches on
interminably.

15.10
Big Beg again
for whom the
bell tolls
obviously, for
no one here.
The tones vanish
quickly in the
soupy air.
More sound lost
in the mix.

The woman security

guard whistles
walking by my
presence deep
in scrutiny
and walkie-talkie
voices from where?
that public phone
over there?
When we stop
waiting for things
to happen
then they happen.

15.10

Big Ben encore
I keep expecting the
rest of the bells
to kick in
but I know
they never
will.

A gaggle of screams
erupts from the
classroom
and from the music
I know they're
watching Psycho.
Anything goes in
this space.

A boy walks by
with a sheet of
paper in his
hand.
I love that
gentle bucking
sound of the
paper bending
with the air
currents coursing
around the
moving body.
Two steps forward
one step back.

Strains of
2001: A Space

Odyssey
(Ligeti?)
bleed from the
film class.
Strange how a
crumpled plastic
bottle skitting
across the
ground can bring
more music to
my ears than
a whole classical
orchestra.
What, then, is
noise?
How many times
have I been caught
in day-to-day
symphonies
where not
a note
was heard?

Late afternoon
seems like a
rush hour of sorts
is kicking in
dense streams of
motion pressing
in from each
side now
like two walls
of sound
proverbial, yes
but also so
real.
As if there
were no
escape.
I'm sitting here
lost waiting
at the pressure
drop.
The juncture
of resonance
birds flying
and cool breeze.

Someone lets out
a scream
I like that
bringing some life
to the proceedings
cutting through the
banks of traffic.
A signal shot
across the
afternoon.

It's so much louder
now than in
the morning.
Cars braking harder
accelerating
harder, the push,
push, push.
A day working out
its last gasps
before evening
comes.

This ex-cantine
a low-pressure
zone
walking in
from the
courtyard
where the wind
blows and sound
seems to dance
in my head
here it all
just drops.
A kind of
suction at play
comforting in
a discomforting
sort of way
because it's
strange
and sitting here
so long
one tends to
sink down in
it.
At some point

we'll hit bottom.

16.05

I can hear
those bells
again.

I can hear
those bells
again.

And someone
talking to
the void

crisp words in
man-voice
cracking off
the walls.

This is an
announcement!
listen up!!

And then a
woman's voice
booming loud
I guess there
must be a
reason for this.

Voices come
tumbling
down.

School's out
people heading
for the doors
their voices
trailing behind
like wisps of
smoke vanishing
in the humid
air, swallowed
up in another
mega-announcement
my ear drums
bursting.

What a finale!

Voices of relief
and joyful chatter
fill the space
low pressure gone.

One kid clapping
applaud the day's end!
We made it through
another.

And all at once
it seems like
night would fall
not because it's
become darker
but after the
ecstasy and noise
of school's out
it all seems
that much quieter
here, like the
day were retreating
from itself
making way for
a dark sky.

Cleaning lady
pushing her
cart one
last time
today.
How often has
has she done
this?

Off in the distance
metal rattling on
the street and
a bird chirping.
What a wonderful
collaboration.
I never heard
the two sound
better on
their own.

Strains of piano
music as if
trickling down
from above.
Or am I
hallucinating?
The heat, the

hours sitting
all take their
toll
and one's
mind starts
to wander,
taking to the
high road.

Much has been
imagined today
but what has
actually been
heard?
Sounds in my
head or sounds
outside?
The room listening
to me listening
to myself.
And so on
and so on.
