**WALKING ON AIR:**
poet Christine Hume and radio philosopher Gregory Whitehead
(first published on the now sadly terminated website The Conversant in 2014)

**Christine Hume:** When walking you are doing and doing-nothing; you are making the road you walk while questioning it; you are seeking ironic distance from your fellow pedestrians (if you are a flâneur); you are avoiding human chatter (if you are a Romantic poet); you are engaging a mode of resistant agency, a tactic that could forge new somatic/neurological pathways; you are experiencing space, time and embodiment as interpenetrated; you are reconfiguring your relation to social or natural life; your body is susceptible, open; you are being carried by the carnality of rhythm. What can you say about your practice as a long-distance walker in relation to your practice as a radio artist?

**Gregory Whitehead:** Walking summons voices in ways that are not always easy to name or map, voices both interior and voices embedded within the landscape (like Chatwin's songlines). As I walk, I am attentive to the hybrid chorus, inside-out and then back inside, step-by-step, listening and murmuring, call and response. At times, the path flat out commands me to sing and since to hear is to obey, I'm happy to comply—usually with a blues having to do with feet. On air, I follow a similar path, trying to orient my own voice, while also conscious of the electromagnetic muck or mulch, the glottal wetlands I think of as the *big sloppy*, an immensely intricate and slippery space of utterance and decay, from which unexpected voices might bubble up at any moment: who's there? The big sloppy always knows more than I do, so I keep my ears open and alert, and I try not to impose compositional structure until all the bits and pieces have been aired.

I am fascinated by how your own hum-cast, a sort of solitary microradio, had a similar open and anticipatory harmonic, leading you ever deeper into the landscape. As you write, the hum's ambient sonority (mimicry of a local wasp, fly, or bee) led me further into the woods. Yet when you took that hum home, it served as camouflage or cover—vibrational resistance?

**CH:** It was an ambivalent signal to be sure, one meant not as locating device, but to render me unlocatable. That signal's narrativity moves toward fluidity, mystery, solitude—a dream where I might finally be OK. You use ambivalent signals to liberate encryption in your castaways; *India Alpha Mike* and *Bravo Echo* for instance, repurpose military radiotelephony alphabet for metaphysical affect. These signals (from the big sloppy?) take on the repetitive form of walking, yet their nuanced variations in tone and feeling open provisional, interlocked pathways where the living/located and dead/dislocated commingle. The voices are outcasts calling out from a porous border. They enact vernacular spells, which are designed to deform conclusions, and to get us lost in strange corridors, intoxicating echoes, unexpected voids. You take an alphabet created to ensure clarity and teleology on a very different trip! Codes, anagrams, ciphers riddle your work, making a kind of poetics of cant, but instead of feeling hermetic, these condensations gesture toward the social.

**GW:** Nietzsche's eternal recurrence of the same, yet the same is never what it seems nor sings to be, and each recurrence changes the space of listening, whether through the pressure of the waves or through being enveloped by their own entropy, as Lucier reminds us. Coded transmissions are often repeated over and over, since there can be no certainty as to who may be listening, or when. Sometimes these loops create absurd dramas in and of themselves, as with European number stations, yet the searching, questioning quality remains vital and even erotic—even if the lethal imperatives of Radio Thanatos may haunt the scene. Radio begins with the twitching finger of the telegraph, though before that, hands manipulated flashes of light or performed angular flagging, all bringing kinesis into play, deep in the mix.

When I first encountered your *Shot*, in the dark, I was instantly taken by this entanglement of carnality with encryption, provoking a sort of sensually engaged disorientation. Turning those pages was like fine tuning along the edges of a shortwave radio tucked under my pillow, late at night.

**CH:** You must be the book's ideal reader! Had we had this conversation before *Shot* was released, I would have used your description for its user manual. If I could turn *Shot* into another object, it would definitely be a radio tucked into a pillow, and in fact I staged a "Sonic Insomnia" by placing many "covers"—including yours—of poems from *Shot* into pillows for the University of Arizona's Poetry Center's library a couple years ago. Radio voices speaking and singing directly to me at night in bed must have been my transitional object, a comfort between worlds. A regressive experience though is not what I wanted to create; I'd rather think about the way hypnogogic effects apprehend internal cadences, or about the arousal of suspense, an endless vibrational searching that allows no single understanding to shut down the conversation.

I wonder why you say "to hear is to obey?" Your work contradicts this dictum, because hearing it percolates playfulness (responsively), and uncertainty. Cracking the codes of *India Alpha Mike* and *Bravo Echo* is an initiation into experiencing their perceptual and sensual proliferations. And here is the terrifying part: as we listen, we are not searching or disintegrating, we are doing both—a frisson of contradiction. Will you say more about encryption as it corresponds to bodies?

**GW:** The "ob" (in obaudire) leans the listener in the direction of the hearing (audire), which is something different than subjection or subordination. In that sense, when I compose the voice castaways, I am voicing in the direction of the hearing. I never know how it will sound in advance, and navigation is performed through dead reckoning. There is a tremendous amount of uncertainty in such a process, above all when the cognitive fog rolls in, and every ear will find some different buoy or wave form to lean in towards. The surface of the code (the message) may be quite transparent; the multiplicity of voices within the rhythmic cyclical structure only reveals itself as the message disintegrates, like the body of Poe's Valdemar, "into a nearly liquid mass of loathesome putrescence", then suddenly reverses course and feigns coherence all over again, back from the muck.

Just as your childhood and adolescence gave birth to counter-intelligent humming, my early years in the social wilds of northern New Jersey provided ample support for an abiding interest in codes, ciphers and secret languages. To my mind, the ideal code was one that when broken would unleash absolute cacophonic mayhem upon the code-breakers, language so shattered and perverse that their prying minds would melt down on the spot. Thus began my lifelong love affair with nonsense, not the rather tame word games of Carroll or Lear, (though I am fond of them, too), but pure inchoate glossolalia. Such utterances may first strike the ear as faintly amusing, yet we soon become uneasy with this ecstatic, unrelenting voice that begins and ends in chaos. You touch on many similar themes in *Ventifacts*, and the fear of the wind as a fear of borderlessness—the winds surge and drone, no stories in sight.

**CH:** I had been thinking about *Bravo Echo* and *India Alpha Mike* as sonic holography (holophony?). The message is only transparent if you know it's code. Not every listener has access to military encryption systems, or is paranoid enough to transpose listening into spelling and then read it. One system of interpretation seeks to decipher (limit and contain), and another seeks to play (proliferation and contamination) beyond the limits of the human. That's according to Derrida, but like you, Beckett shows us how a writer can inhabit both systems simultaneously. His work for the Resistance—encoding and decoding messages hidden in toothpaste tubes and matchboxes—led to writing in a self-limiting French, a double-coded dialogue, a radically subtractive style that opens unwieldy complexities. On that same page, Hugo Ball destroyed language into atomized bits in order to rewire the very nature of thinking that had led to the previous world war. When we pulverize words, when we cannot say what has to be said, we set free other kinds of words; we say in fossil poetry, in crypt words; we say in murmur, in stutter, in chora. These sounds could be the elusive voices issuing from new mouths ripped into the body by war in the form of wounds. I'm thinking of course of your portrayal of a wound as code planted in the body by technology in *Display Wounds*. In that piece, the wound's person/body is separate, displaced (a word related to ecstasy), because the way the wound appears on the surface is rarely an accurate identification of the full dimension of the wound. Do you ever ventriloquize the wound? If a code is lodged in the voice, does it sound like nonsense?

When I listen to an infant's full arsenal of vocalizations ("the apex of babble!") it's loud and clear what we have given up in order to adopt a mother tongue. Language tends to normalize experience, especially somatic and kinetic experience. The girl whose locker was next to mine in high school sometimes broke out in tongues. I was new to rural Pennsylvania, filled with its sociolects and religions I knew nothing about. I did not know Mennonites could be charismatic. I thought to put a wallet between her teeth and her tongue as I had been told to with people having seizures, actually once thought of as divine visitations. In other words, I was grasping to read the event. The precarious, provisional edges between phonemes poured over me as I prolonged my search for my math book. It was truly riveting to hear her—like an Aeolian harp or the wind filled with a secret chorus of subaltern or subterranean voices. Uncanny and disturbing, it was an entirely physical (touching) experience, each of the half dozen times or so it happened. Is that because I wasn't able to translate her glossolalia into spiritual meaning? Without understanding, I

could lose myself in an immediate and palpable physicality. Is that it? I want to coerce the narrative here, but both its eroticism and ethics require me to hold my tongue.

**GW:** Hugo Ball wanted vowels that would "fool around" (as in "jolifanto bambla o falli bambla"), and words that were measured by the duration of rhythmic pulsation, not by letters. Like Karl Kraus, Ball endlessly lamented the corruptibility of written language, and even proposed the incineration of libraries as an act of ethical purification; only embodied, remembered language known by heart would survive, and the rhythms of legends would henceforth be restored. A couple of decades later, proposals for burning books—and bodies—would catch fire within a rather different context than the one imagined by the utopian Ball, whose portrait photo from those legendary Dada evenings at the Cabaret Voltaire hangs here in my studio.

My interest in pulverized words began during recovery from a car accident when I was sixteen, sharing a room with a young man suffering from an advanced and inoperable brain tumor. From time to time (and at all hours, day and night) he would erupt in tongues that would appear extremely tormented, yet then a few moments after the eruption, he would gently and quietly laugh to himself. When I asked him about it, he said he had no idea where the eruptions came from; only that he felt immensely relieved and peaceful following the eruptions. Since then, neuroscience has confirmed the relationship between glossolalia and stress relief, shared with affiliated utterances such as hums and screaming, though each of these has its own intricate limbic flow, and I would never throw them into the same acoustic stew pot. Your fearless tracking of hums both inside and out, performed in your recent chapbook, gives us a sense of the extremely rich territory for hum-hermeneutics; screams and speaking in tongues certainly invite the same sort of polyphonic conduction, and you felt ripples of such, during your locker-side experiences of Mennonite glossolalia.

In my scream project *Pressures of the Unspeakable*, I slightly adjusted Wittgenstein's famous dictum, "Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen" to read, "darüber muss man schreien"; that is, rather than passing over the unspeakable in silence, scream it out into the wind. At my longstanding and ephemeral Center for Woundscape Studies, we stress that if the wound is not allowed to spill forth all its chaos and pain, the "healing" will do nothing but provide cover for the festering interior contamination, which is very much a contamination of the self. Yes, there is relief in that release, as experienced by my hospital room mate, and by screamers and tongue-speakers everywhere, though ecstasy would be only one modulation among many others, including pure agony.

Your own writing offers a veritable wound atlas for vulnerological reflection. How do you read wounds, or more importantly, how do you hear them?

**CH:** I'll be the first to tell you. My own Center, which is in practice very much decentered, for the Hum, distinguishes between historic wounds, self-inflicted wounds, other-inflicted wounds, sympathetic wounds, projectile wounds, as well as future wounds. Of course each is always

tempering and imagining the others, but this taxonomy makes atlasing legible and, more importantly, acknowledges the wound's dimensionality (even if you can't yet hear it). We are interested in hearing them, of course, but sometimes that only comes once our supernumerary auricles have bloomed in response to rewilding our vocal capacities. I'm getting ahead of myself. In any case, a wound's emotional openness is carried by its addressability. Then, we may be ready for dialogue.

The first thing we do after mapping the wounds is to learn how to emit a sound we ourselves cannot hear. With careful training we deftly emit high-frequency sound waves, becoming human instruments of ultra-sound. We've adopted methods from "Instructions for Sounding the Uterus," simple substituting the word "wound" for "uterus" and "hum" for "sound":

> (1) Insert the high-level sterile hum, without touching the walls of the wound and maintaining gentle traction with the tip of the hum.
>
> (2) Advance the hum into the wound cavity and STOP when a slight resistance is felt.
>
> (3) And so on, into the intricacies.

The goal is for the hummer to sustain contact with the voice of the wound until an echo-pulse cycle begins. The beauty of the hum is that it absorbs contamination; it is capable of humiliating itself, capable of arousing itself inside its own violence and difficulty. In the basest possible terms this technique might be akin to the "What-I-hear-you-saying-is…" echolalia of therapy, or OWS's human microphone. Since wounds speak on all frequencies but are generally shy, using ultra-sound protects their privacy at the same time that it allows them to feel heard.

Of course wounds speak all the time through the human voice. We at the Center for the Hum have a basement archive of such voices, but our primary goal is to allow wounds to be heard before they force their way into the larynx. I'll give you an odd example: in graduate school, one of my languages was Old English, and to prepare for the exam I took a class that asked each student to translate the whole of *Beowulf*, so many lines for each class. As an English-speaker having lived in Germany during prime language-acquisition years, I had the hard-wiring for Old English; it came easily to me. However, when my turn to read aloud came, I could barely summon my voice, which usually carries all too well. My professor frowned and grew irritated. My perplexed classmates teased me about my future at 1-900-BEOWULF. If you've read the poem aloud, you've heard its militaristic rhythms, and you can imagine the seeming subversiveness of my weird bedroom voice. The only way I can understand it is that I was speaking through a wound that had its origins in my childhood Germany. The linguistic structures—the nine declensions of verb exploding sentences after all the other words have been spoken—triggered kinetic memory. To twist a Beckett quip: in the madhouse of the mouth and nowhere else.

**GW:** Yes! And what bedlam, that place of pleasure, punishment and contagion. Here comes everybody all over again, lebensraum enough even for the Germans. I wonder if I might coax you to add your experience of your broken jaw into this woundscape? This mandibular reconfiguration is an experience we share, though in my case, the break was involuntary, as the result of two heavy objects meeting at high speed on a map that had been, shall we say, poorly anticipated. The result: a full-blooded incarnation of JG Ballard's "terrifying almanac of insane wounds". A piece of my shattered jaw punctured the dura mater, and brain fluid began to leak rather too copiously through my sinuses. They managed to plug the leak and then wire together my jaw. I had conveniently lost several teeth, permitting a feeding and breathing tube; alas, speaking was difficult, and when the doctors questioned me, it was a bit like the bone-dance scene in *The Singing Detective*, except all dem bones were jaw bones, and all the dancers were splinters of my self. Your jaw, as you reconstruct the scene in *Hum*, was broken by plan—something to do with an overly zealous oral surgeon, and the threat of hearing loss via labyrinth compression, or so you were told?

**CH:** You manage to dramatize your accident as an admirable mongrel of medical description, literary reference and ghastly cabaret that rub up against—and stretch—the limits of your self-perception. My jawbreaker is far less sympathetic, though it too sucked.

My jaw confuses subjective and objective wounds, with "willingly" as the hinge. There I was: 17 and feeling on top of my game. My consent to this surgery remains the most difficult part to metabolize. But yes, there were threats of hearing loss, sleep apnea, and TMJ at some fuzzy distant date. And a familial urging as well as the doctor's palpable excitement at the anomaly of my jaw, which he explained, kept growing after the rest of me stopped. I could have worn my freakish jaw as a badge of will and difference. How punk was I? I felt more at home in the violence of trying to please: braces, broken mandible, upper and lower jaw wired shut for eight weeks. The surgeon didn't have the heart to imagine me at the prom without an open mouth. He released me that morning as if he were granting me my own desire.

But before that, to not have use of your own mouth (to feel your tongue flap helplessly against its cage, to clench your voice and squeeze it under the shut door, to have nothing enter) was monstrous. I spoke sideways out of the side of my lips. My mouth starved of sumptuous roundness, my jaw stewed in its own ingrown words. I ate nothing solid. I audibly opened my throat. Have I made my point? I did not run. I did not sing, though humming called me back. I learned to speak with my face, a fiercely somatic silence discharging. When my mouth opened again, what spilled out was something more acute and crucial than what I thought I wanted to say. Did your jaw break change your voice, in any way that you conceive of "voice?"

**GW:** What a terrible story, the imposition of consent via parental anxiety and medical projection; what seems most freakish is not your jaw, but rather the doctor's "palatable excitement."

The English word for person descends from the Latin personare, *to sound through*. So drastic alterations of the so-called speech apparatus change our persona in all sorts of ways. After they

wired my smashed jaw together, which had a certain urgency given the brain fluid leakage, I was wheeled into that double room and its screaming/laughing soundscape. I hated the awful gargle-gurgle sounds that emerged when I tried to speak, so I took a vow of silence, and let my persona go underground, for safety. The following autumn, with wires finally removed and broken teeth bridged, I made a cassette radio program with a close friend—an absurdist variety show, with dozens of improvised personae, and lots of loopy singing, all immensely beneficial to retrieving my buried voice, though it had a different ring to it than the voice of the pre-accident self.

A decade later, I became fascinated by one of Freud's most peculiar books, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and particularly by the second section, which moves from a fairly conventional analysis of shell shock into a discussion of the fort-da rhythm of child's play, staging the disappearance and return of the mother. What convinced me was not the detail of Freud's analysis, but the proximity between trauma and play, something that made immediate sense to me, and I went on to explore this proximity in an early (1987) radio piece, also titled *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

Freud had his own jaw issues, as a result of carcinoma related to his cigar habit, a compulsive pleasure that eventually left him unhinged. He called his prosthesis "the monster," and it was fashioned out of gold and vulcanite, with an obdurator clod fashioned from wax and gutta percha. An assortment of clasps and springs functioned to keep the thing clacking away, though frequent malfunctions left Freud frustrated. My researches eventually led me to the Army Medical Museum at Walter Reed military hospital, where there were abundant materials relating to facial reconstruction and prosthetic limbs in all categories. This provoked a good deal of reflection about the neurobiology of phantom pain, and how it related to my intuitive idea of phantom personae, as voices and subjectivities, in the wake of trauma.

I was particularly fascinated by an exhibit that displayed an amputated leg inside a miniature coffin. The leg had belonged to General Daniel Sickles until he was struck by a cannon ball at Gettysburg. Sickles visited his leg every year, on the anniversary of its amputation; there are a number of photographs of him standing on his prosthesis, gazing at his "true" leg. All this seemed to have massive implications for my own schizophonic explorations, and not long after, I released the 7" record that grooves both *Principia Schizophonica* and *How to Pronounce 'Prosthesis'*.

**CH:** So you played your way into those radio voices and phantom personae. Are those voices in contact with, or do they conjure, your pre-accident self? And do you visit that self as something "true" like the General's leg, or in excess of its own construction, or corrupted into prosthetic multiplicities, or what?

I think of faciality and vocality as consolidations organizing and performing subjectivities. We are recognizable through them, to ourselves, to others. They exceed culture to expose the lived qualities of our lives, but when they slip out of sync or fail to represent, things get interesting. Mina Loy's advertising pamphlet "Auto-Facial-Construction," might be a problematic but

playful way to resolve inner and outer perceptual worlds (as if they were tidily independent). She offers lessons for physiognomical retraining. She wanted to teach the middle aged to become "masters of their facial destiny" by achieving ideal mimetic relation between face and voice, so restoring our "inherent right not only to be ourselves but to look like ourselves." One distorted muscle, she says (rather threateningly!), "causes a fundamental disharmony in self-expression." Maybe she had in mind Duchenne de Boulogne's insane study, "The Mechanism of Human Facial Expression", simulating emotionality corresponding to pivotal moments in Greek mythology and Shakespeare via electrical jolts applied directly to the face. In any case, as I was ranting about my minor facial reconstruction, images of detainees who have sewn their lips together to stage hunger strikes dogged me. Those asylum seekers and protesters harness the plangency of their self-imposed silence into political power, a.k.a. voice. (Whereas I was following the voice of authority.) In postmortem facial reconstruction, if a mouth is difficult to keep closed, the mortician injects wire into the gums and mandible, twists them shut, then super-glues the lips closed. The culminating ritual in an ancient Egyptian funeral, however, known as "opening the mouth," involved cutting the vocal cords (sometimes by inserting the foreleg of a bull or an iron adze), freeing the dead to feed themselves in the afterlife. Is it possible to float in these fogs of intelligibility? I am and have been listening or half-listening to *Principia Schizophonica* on repeat to see how it would infect my response. Its fervent material detachments are winning against connectivity! I'm unfurling in a fractured umwelt, which, Uexküll says, is a melody, and that melody is singing itself—the song proffered, the song heard within, and the song inbetween, interlapping.

**GW:** Refusing to speak, and also refusing to eat; yes, political prisoners, stripped of everything except silence and hunger. In time, forced feeding of the sort experienced by detainees at Guantanamo Bay, using restraint chairs and feeding tubes, will be understood as a form of medically mediated torture and as a war crime, but we are not there yet. In researching the history of forced feeding, I was fascinated to discover that Djuna Barnes penned an article in 1914, "How It Feels to be Forcibly Fed," subjecting herself to the full procedure, in solidarity with imprisoned suffragettes. She refers to unbidden visions of remote horrors.

Trench warfare in WWI produced an abundance of facial wounds, severe disfiguration, often associated with "war neurosis" shell-shock; it seems you either had your face ripped open, or else your face was turned into a blank cipher. In 1917, the American artist Anna Coleman Ladd established a studio in Paris specifically for the fashioning of so-called portrait masks that would provide wounded soldiers with remarkably close resemblances to their pre-injury face. She used extremely thin galvanized copper that she then painted, working from photographs, as well as facial casts. Moustaches and eyebrows were often incorporated into the mask, together with glass eyes when required, depending on the nature of the disfiguration. Mask owners reported a deep sense of relief while wearing them, even when alone.

Serious concussions or traumatic brain injuries challenges subjectivity in a more direct way, disrupting and in some cases destroying the neural pathways that define who we are as conscious selves. Yet the brain, being endlessly resilient until entirely dead, finds a way to protect core

biological survival, and then rebuilds subjectivity from there. Regarding severe blows to the head, I like to use the phrase “axonal reconfiguration” to describe the neuroplastic retrenching of synaptic flows as a kind of figuring out, a learning to live within a new subjectivity, a fresh persona. Yet the old self survives as a sort of echo among the dendrites. Even decades after my accident, I still receive intuitive impressions of my pre-accident self residing in my body, a sensate being that seems achingly familiar, though I cannot access it, or do anything with it, an inaccessible presence that brings on intense melancholia. To mitigate phantom pain with amputated limbs, neurologists have conceived a variety of ways to trick the nervous system into the feeling that the limb is still there; I am convinced there are similar fictive and poetic artifices that offer pathways to the phantom self—which brings us full circle, back to long walks, and to singing the self through the mountains.