

the **sound** of | the **invisible**

LINDA NEIL

I receive a third meaning—evident, erratic, obstinate ... exceeding psychology, anecdote, function, meaning ... this third meaning is that of *significance* ...

In the classical paradigm of the five senses the third sense is hearing. This is a happy coincidence, since what is here in question is indeed *listening* ... listening bears within it that metaphor best suited to the 'textual': orchestration, counterpoint, stereophony.

Roland Barthes¹

— BEN AND THE ART OF STORYTELLING

My father, whose name was Ben, loved telling stories. I wish I could say it was the Irish in him, but he was a Mancunian by birth, a brooding Celt by ancestry and a migrant Australian. It was from his storytelling sessions with my Uncle Charlie that I first understood Pythonesque one-upmanship. These competitive narratives consisted of colourful descriptions of shoeless boys collecting firewood in the snow while daddy became emphysemic in a coalmine and mummy planned their exodus to Australia. In these sessions, matriarchs fight back tears while burying a succession of choleric children, patriarchs swear off the booze in a pact with God that involved, at the very least, the survival of the remaining offspring.

These were the first ideas I formed of life in another place and time, and from these two old raconteurs, who liked to outdo each other in their colourful and not altogether nonfictional retelling of their shared history, I learned not only about making stories but about listening to them.

Uncle Charlie eventually owned all the souvenir shops in the Hilton Hotel chain. He was a crabby old bastard, stingy with his money and his love. But when he told his stories he became momentarily part of the magic of the signified, as well as the magic of the signifier, being both narrator and participant in his stories.

My father was a Christian Brother for thirty years and eventually was appointed head of the Strathfield Seminary in charge of all the young religious men in Australia, until he walked out one day, leaving his charred dinner burning in a saucepan, to be replaced, he loved to tell us ruefully, by the soon-to-be-famous writer Morris West. Or so this particular myth goes. Coping with the shame of failing at his vocation, he became, after several nervous breakdowns, a Latin and English teacher at various grammar schools, a husband to a much younger bride and, eventually, an elderly father to me and my four brothers and sisters.

As a father he was the age of most of my contemporaries' grandfathers and, in some cases, great-grandfathers. And despite his robust physique—in some old photos he resembles that famous picture of Picasso in his Y-fronts—he told stories like an old man, full of humour, wisdom, pathos, and all the genuinely unsettling details of a life lived, from our perspective anyway, in an unimaginably distant past, *a long long time ago*.

One of my father's favourite stories was of how he met my mother. This is a tale I remember far more vividly than any that was read to me, or any that I read. My mother, golden haired, ruddy cheeked, sits on the banks of the West End side of the Brisbane River. It is a silvery spring day and she is dragging her nets out into the water. She loves the solitude of prawning, even though she is only twelve, and her brother, who will eventually become the captain of the Wallabies Rugby Union team, is up at the house making a racket with his footie mates. My father, who—depending on who's telling the story—looks like a young Montgomery Clift, Dana Andrews, Tyrone Power or a mid-career Fredric March, is on his way to mum's house to tutor her brother. He stops and talks to her. She tells him about prawning, about throwing the nets out wide and dragging them in slowly, about waiting, about the wash of the waves from the ferries that chug between the banks of the river. He smiles, dazzled and dazzling. The sun glints off his perfect teeth, and whatever serendipity existed in the skies above West End that day beamed down on my future parents.

— A TRIUMVIRATE OF MEANING

In his notes on the Eisenstein film *Ivan the Terrible* in *Image-Music-Text*, Roland Barthes distinguishes three levels of meaning in stills from the silent classic. I will make no attempt to deconstruct this family narrative from the point of view of my father's position



in the psychological context of his culture. I will merely present this narrative in order to distinguish the three levels of meaning that Barthes saw. The first ‘informational’ level, the one that *communicates*,² sets the scene, introduces the characters, placing them in time by their clothes and perhaps their haircuts. There is a grown man, a young girl, some prawning nets, a river and, amidst all of it somewhere, a message. The second ‘symbolic’ level, the one that, according to Barthes, *signifies*,³ is no longer open to the science of the message but to the sciences of the symbol, the symbols here being that of love, attraction, age and youth, the light of my mother’s youthful hair and complexion versus the dark brooding looks of my father, and beside them, the ageless river winding through the landscape down towards the inevitable sea. And the third level? Here I will digress from Barthes’s model, dealing as it does with the visual image, and treat the story as an oral narrative, a story that is simultaneously being told and listened to, what might be described as a sonic or aural image.

Uncle Charlie and his wife, Aunty Kath,
at mum and dad’s coast house.

This third level, the one that exceeds the ‘simple existence of the scene’,⁴ as well as its symbolic resonance, compels what Barthes refers to as a ‘poetical’ grasp, which I take to mean the obtuse, inexplicable reasons why the story still endures in my memory. I cannot say now that I particularly believe in it, even that it is true. Its existence is not dependent on factual communication, and its symbolism is only rich to those who may wish to see it that way. I remember it because it was told to me, I remember it because of *how* it was told to me, simply, poetically, musically, with a reverence for its details. There were always

specific words used to describe things. For instance, mum's prawning net was always 'handwoven' even if it wasn't, and dad's hair always 'crinkled in sooty black waves'. As if in the telling of its details it could prove, or at least preserve, its veracity. And despite the fact that my parent's relationship was scarred by difficulties—and that I know for a fact my father's teeth were false, having lost them all before the end of his malnourished teenaged years because of rickets—the story still lives, as a strange heightened fiction, passed on by word of mouth. I remember it for its sound, the almost tangible vibrations it created during the strange symbiosis of speaking and listening, and for the things that occurred, as often happens during the best music, in the silences and the gaps *between* words.

It was my father's love of storytelling that made it memorable. His speech possessed the necessary *cadence* for it. And being the children of musical parents we possessed all the necessary imagination to take it that little step further and make it so. And so the collusion (and collision) of fact, symbol and the *obtuse* meaning, a phrase which I will purloin from Barthes and for the purposes of this essay call the 'musical' meaning, create this family fable. The resonance of the 'musical' meaning, rather than the facts it might try to communicate, is brought to life by language, the 'notes of literature', and as in music, by rhythm, timbre, volume, speed and texture. And if, as Barthes writes, the obtuse or 'musical meaning can be seen as an accent', an 'accent not directed towards meaning ... (or even) an *elsewhere* of meaning',⁵ then my father, husband of a musical wife and dad to five musical kids, played the accents of his narrative like a maestro, and played us, through this particular story, like a one-man band, so that we 'oohed' and 'aahed' in all the right places, at moments of drama, tension, romance and resolution, in harmony and as soloists.

— MOTHER, YOU KNOW THE STORY

My mother never had as much time to listen to my father's stories as I did. Despite her background as a singer and performer in operas and operettas, she was, for the most part, too busy cooking and keeping order in our ramshackle house overrun with books and children. She did, however, have a few stories to tell of her own. But rather than speak her stories, she sang them, first of all, in foreign languages I didn't understand: German, French, sometimes Italian and, once or twice, Spanish. She would eventually form her own strong views on singing in a language that we, her audience, did not know. 'The words', I would hear her admonish her singing students time and time again. 'The words are what you are communicating. Remember. We MUST understand the words!'

I remember her stirring a stew over our second-hand stove, with its badly wired hot plates and food-encrusted sides. Suddenly, in clear bell-like English, she bellowed out through bursts of steam:



Mother you know the story ...
he has betrayed me
and now I stand here
with the results of his love,
a baby abandoned to its fate
and me, alas, I have not the strength to go on ...
not the strength to go on,
now that I know he is with Lola.⁶

Left: The writer's father, Ben Neil, aka
Brother Benedict.
Right: Joan and Ben Neil.

There were also Schubert's settings of *The Erlking*, *The Trout* and *Gretchen at the Spinning Wheel*, with which she used to transfix us as she swept up the remnants of dinner off the floor while we huddled in the corner in terror at the thought of the Erlking himself, which from the descriptive power of Schubert's music conjured up a vision of imminent terror, coming to haunt our nightly dreams. There were, as well, some of the seminal musical comedy numbers from the American stage, stories, in the tradition of ancient Roman and Grecian myths, with built-in instructive morals, from which we learnt such vital information as 'you can't get a man with a gun', 'the farmer and the cowman should be friends', as well as:

you say potato, I say potarto,
you say tomato, I say tomarto,
potato, potarto, tomato, tomarto,
let's call the whole thing off.⁷

— THE POSSIBILITIES OF RESONANCE

In this writing I am drawn back again and again to Barthes's dissection of the Eisenstein stills. There is something compelling about the sequence of black-and-white scenes he uses to illustrate his text. It reminds me of the first time I saw *Battleship Potemkin* at a student film festival in Melbourne. Riveted by the montages of slaughter and suffering, we realised that this was a silent film that rendered us silent and then made us listen. Listen for what? *Battleship Potemkin* covered known historical facts as well as being a great and pioneering piece of cinema. Did we listen for these things? No, our brains were already crammed with our knowledge of Eisenstein and the place his film occupies in history. What we listened for, what we heard, was what the *experience* of the film compelled us to—to lay our interpretive minds blank, to become fresh to the experience of seeing the film, to become open to the tiny details in what I will call (as others have) a work of art, to take in, without even realising it at the time, the inarticulate obtuse meaning, which is, in Barthes words, 'indifferent to the story and its obvious meaning',⁸ but which *opens up* to what I will call the infinite possibilities of resonance. This resonance becomes possible through the art of listening, a phrase which I will interpret as meaning an ability to let oneself become, as a musician does, the bamboo flute, or, as an artist does, the blank canvas through which sound, image and meaning can flow; to become, as reader, the empty page on which the writer marks his/her words.

— THE GREAT SINGING GATSBY

This is first illustrated for me one afternoon as I sit in the Brisbane Grammar School auditorium listening to my father and mother deliver a musical lecture on *The Great Gatsby*. I am fourteen and I haven't yet read the famous Fitzgerald novel. That afternoon I hear my father read extracts from the book interspersed with oral stories from the twenties: strange tales of speak-easies, flappers, goodtime gals and their dreamy beaux, twilight characters standing in a corridor of what seemed like magical time. A few golden years of innocence wedged between the dual catastrophic realities of the century's Great War and Great Depression. The aural experience of hearing the words of known and unknown writers delivered in dad's measured tones was inter-cut with mum singing famous songs from the twenties, Gatsby's songs, my father announced, with titles like 'Ain't We Got Fun!', 'Yes, We Have No Bananas!', and 'I'll be loving you always'.

I don't know whether the sensuousness of this memory has something to do with the proximity of my fourteen-year-old body to an auditorium full of teenage boys, or whether the ache inside Fitzgerald's prose was in some strange way arousing. It could have been the slides my father used to illustrate his narratives, black-and-white photographs of men



and woman staring loosely into the camera, lounging easily into each other, on tennis courts, in dance halls, bars and plush drawing rooms, with what I would later recognise as the casual physicality that comes from money, alcohol, sex and drugs. The memory of these black-and-white photos of an American world far removed from the bleakly Russian realms of Eisenstein leads me back again to Barthes.

Left: The writer, her two sisters, Cathie and Janice, and her mother Joan Neil (nee Cottrell).

Right: Prize-winning singer Joan Cottrell, before she married my father.

— BACK TO BARTHES

Here it is possible to encounter again the musical meaning, which Barthes describes as ‘greater than the pure, upright, perpendicular of the narrative’, opening up the field of meaning ‘infinitely’. Extending ‘outside culture, knowledge, information’,⁹ it is the almost untranslatable *feeling of interpretation* that I embrace as the *alchemical, magical aspect of narrative*, which can only be arrived at through ‘the art of listening’. What Barthes refers to as ‘the infinity of language’ I will reinterpret as ‘the possibilities of resonance’, the subtle vibrations that exist beyond what is immediately comprehensible and analysable in language that is not just read but listened to. This listening happens in such a way that the aural opens up into the visual, which, in turn, opens up into a higher sort of listening, like a fractal that forms and reforms itself in a perfect open system.

And so the photographs, which my father used to illustrate Fitzgerald’s poetic narrative and the carnival-ish aspect of the music hall songs played by my mother, opened up another field of meaning, beyond the sound to another meaning, to the image, to another sound and then finally, as Barthes would have it, to ‘infinity’.

If asked my impressions of *The Great Gatsby* based on that afternoon I would have used words like ‘golden’, ‘fading’, ‘browns bleeding into amber’. I would have said ‘undercurrents’, ‘dreamy’, ‘lost’, ‘empty’, ‘hollow’. I could probably have hummed some haunting melody; perhaps, even at that age, I might have understood the yearning, but intellectually I did not have the capacity to see Jay Gatsby as a symbol of an America fading from one deluded incarnation to another. Yet, just as stills capture fleeting moments from otherwise constantly moving images, I could have experienced an ‘interpretive feeling’ disassociated from meaning or language, but one that occurs as a result of having listened, not as a conscious act, but as an act of surrender and abandonment.

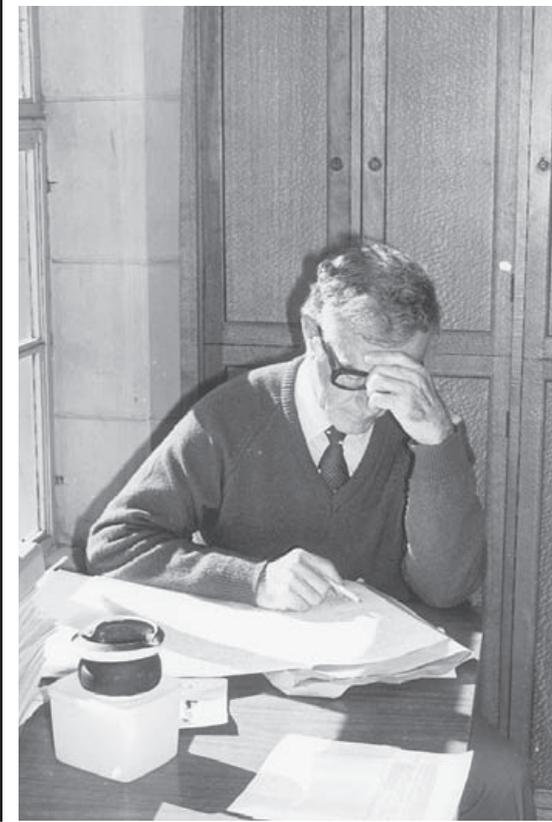
— ABANDONING ABANDONMENT

Later, studying American literature at university I was unable to front up to exams in such a state of abandonment. There were questions to be explored and answered, exams to pass. Already gathering bad undergraduate habits of reading someone else’s interpretation of texts, and becoming the sort of idle, intransitive, consumerist reader that Barthes described, I took control of my reading rather than abandoning myself to it. In the utilitarian approach to education that the university seemed to encourage—*get ’em in, get ’em out*—I became the worst sort of literary imperialist; that is, once I had ‘conquered’ the text, I no longer allowed it any potential to grow, change or find its own identity beyond the one I first gave it (by the necessity of having to read and interpret it for an exam). Inevitably, I wouldn’t even bother to read the damn thing. Just send in my paid lackeys (‘reader friendly’ interpretations purchased, with student discount, at the Union Bookshop) and let them do all the hard work for me.

I didn’t stay long in the system, eventually dropping out to travel and study music, perhaps in the hope that if I stopped reading so fast and so furiously I might learn how to really listen again. Listening, as I discovered later, was not a passive but an active thing, demanding concentration and attention. It was, however, a long time before I listened the way I did that afternoon I first heard *The Great Gatsby*. Words echoed into acoustic space to be soaked up, it seemed, into the pores of my skin and *felt* as organic, physical entities, as visceral and electric as music, which is as disassociated from literal meaning as Barthes’s ‘third meaning’.

— THE BIFURCATION POINT

In his work, the Nobel prize-winning scientist Ilya Prigogine identified what he called ‘open systems’—systems that are able to exchange energy and matter with their environment. His work on open systems, which has been applied to everything from a



seed germinating to a company expanding, a cell dividing, a human being making behavioral changes—further identifies a point that he calls the bifurcation point (bifurcate meaning ‘to divide into two branches’). At this point, the open system, reaching its limit of input, spontaneously re-orders itself in an entirely new way. The new structure will be non-causal and non-linear compared with what went before, a sort of quantum leap, after which the system ‘escapes into a higher order’.¹⁰

Ben Neil, English and Latin master at the Brisbane Boys Grammar School.

Regarding this work by Prigogine, I will here make a leap of my own and link Barthes’s third meaning with Prigogine’s bifurcation point. If the human brain is a prime example of an open system, cannot a sentence or a paragraph be one as well, morphing and transforming—via the active participation of anyone reading or listening—into other forms, from the first ‘informational’ level to the second ‘symbolic’ level, at which point, according to Prigogine’s model, it re-orders itself into the third level, the ‘obtuse’ or ‘musical’ level?

— BONES AND THE THIRD WAY

The Dalai Lama speaks of the third way, as does Tony Blair, Julia Kristeva speaks of the third alternative and popular magazines are currently obsessed with the middle ground that lies between established ways and the far-out alternatives. And here too I will hang my conclusion on the hook of this third meaning, the ‘musical’ meaning. To me, this is the meaning that speaks beyond literal or symbolic meaning, that captures, however fleetingly, the sound of the invisible. There are several lines in my own writing where I feel

I have successfully captured this third and ‘musical’ meaning. They occur in a very short narrative of mine called ‘bones’, which was used as the lyrics for a spoken-word epic on the CD *The New Passion Club*.

Some moments she felt the wind pass right
through her. And the stars. Her body emptied
out, she felt the light from night skies filling
her up. Deeply. She knew by heart the way home and
saw her life as it lay ahead of her, stretched out
streets, the order of civilization. Scared to
forget anything, she practised photographing
everything with the camera buried deep inside her.¹¹

On the first ‘informational’ level, these lines communicate a sort of physical transcendence, where the boundaries of the body, though still intently felt, have merged with the elements. There is still a feeling of groundedness, of a clearly defined humanness, even as light and stars fill her up. On the second ‘symbolic’ level, allow the literal to merge into the visual. The key signs, if rendered visually, would be wind, moon, stars, bleeding lines, a diffusion of form, a merging of body and spirit, even as the subject retains enough self-awareness to *photograph* herself in the transcendent state she finds herself in. The third level, the obtuse ‘musical’ level, occurs when the visual turns itself into ... what? There are clues in the words ‘wild’, ‘sacred’, ‘deep’, a body so diffused it has become part of the elemental things it has just described. Is this how Barthes might have described it if he would ever have been interested in any work of mine, this signifier that relates to no specific signified? Is this the perfect open system that Prigogine describes, if we can for a moment connect a literary system with a scientific one, where, if one looks closely enough, and the writing itself is *open* enough, one can see each level of meaning morphing into the next? Can a sentence be like a biological entity, splitting off and reforming itself at higher and higher levels of complexity and meaning until it arrives at something simple and yet mysterious? Is this a foolish leap to make? Is this mysterious simplicity the ‘infinity’ of which Barthes writes: ‘opening out into the infinity of language it can come through as limited [and therefore foolish?] in the eyes of analytic reason?’¹²

— MAKING THE LEAP

Later during that first year at university, I fell in love for the first time and lay entwined with my love, reading the last few pages from Joyce’s *Ulysses*. My partner is a composer who is setting bits of Molly Bloom’s soliloquy to music, and as we read it aloud together, naked, flushed with love and a little cheap wine, the difficulties of reading the words on



The writer and her first band.

the page, indeed the necessity of ever having to use punctuation again, evaporate. We read randomly. We read backwards. We cut up the text into little pieces, throw it up into the air, and read it wherever it falls. We write our favourite bits across each other's bodies, in eyeliner and lipstick, phrases like:

my Precious one everything connected with your precious Body everything underlined that comes from it is a thing of beauty and joy for ever.

Only, to fill up as much flesh as we can, we leave no space between the words so it comes out like this:

myPreciousoneeverythingconnectedwithyourpreciousBodyyourpreciousBodyyourpreciou
 yourpreciouspreciouspre.

Some phrases we repeat over and over:

the cracked things come into my head/its only nature
 the cracked things come into my head/its only nature
 the cracked things come into my head/its only nature
 cracked things come/only nature
 cracked come/only
 cracked/only
 nature/cracked
 onlyonlyonly

Much later, at the end of one of those life cycles whose circular nature you only become aware of when they are almost complete, I find myself in a recording studio, making loops out of bits of spoken word. In much the same way that my lover and I deconstructed and reassembled Joyce's text, I find myself cutting and pasting bits of words and other sounds and working them up into a seven-second piece of sound collage and then looping them over and over (with the help of Macintosh's Pro Tools). Once again a text has morphed into music, a simple literal communication has been transformed, and a musical resonance has taken over from comprehension.

— ACTS OF FOOLISHNESS

Barthes conjectured that apart from any other function, the third obtuse (and musical) meaning 'sterilizes criticism'.¹³ To my mind, therefore, it falls into the category of the mysterious, the non-functional aspect of things that defies description and sometimes belief. Barthes also describes the third meaning as keeping 'a permanent state of *depletion* ... (which designates empty verbs)'.¹⁴ I will make another non-functional, foolish leap here and conjecture that 'a state of *depletion*' parallels the resonant emptiness that is found in pauses, silences, in the spaces between words, in what I like to call 'the sound of the invisible'. It is all the possibilities that can exist in the split seconds of nothingness that soundwaves disappear into, in the moments of potential before things are brought into being, in the spaces in a text where the brain must make a little leap to recreate or assimilate the things it has seen or heard.

— FRAGMENTS WITHIN FRAGMENTS

If she could have she would have peeled back
her skin, snapped off little pieces of
bone and scattered them behind her. So that
all her future lovers and sons and daughters
could pick up these tiny fragments, and with
wonder hear her whisper, as if once again
she stood in these magic places:

*I too passed along this way
And I was not broken.*¹⁵

I'll end with these lines because this fragment refers to fragments, as does Eisenstein, as quoted by Barthes, 'the centre of gravity is no longer the element "between shots"—the shock—but the element "inside the shot"—the accentuation within the fragment'.¹⁶ As the narrator does in 'bones', Eisenstein gives his fragments enough weight to rebalance the

centre of gravity. He invests the tiniest details with the greatest resonance. 'bones' also contains the ultimate extension of the art of listening, the possibilities of hearing inanimate, dead things whisper. If you listen intently enough, the fragment seems to be saying about fragments, you can hear things you never thought possible. And if you are sensitive enough, as both reader and writer, to the tiniest speck of detail, much can be discovered.

Whatever this third meaning or 'musical' meaning is, and Barthes does a good job of describing it, it may also come out of this emptiness, out of the words that are left unwritten, the breath left unexhaled, the things left unsaid.

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1. Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, Fontana, Glasgow, 1977, pp. 53–4.
 2. Barthes, p. 52.
 3. Barthes, p. 52.
 4. Barthes, p. 53.
 5. Barthes, p. 62.
 6. Pietro Mascagni, *Cavalleria Rusticana*, full musical score, Dover Publications, New York, 1993.
 7. Irving Berlin, 'You Can't Get a Man With a Gun', *Annie Get Your Gun*, compact disc, 1966 Lincoln Centre cast recording, Victor Classics, BMG, 1988; Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, 'The Farmer and the Cowman Should Be Friends', *Oklahoma!*, compact disc, 1957 original cast recording, Angel Classics, RCA, 1989; George Gershwin, 'Let's Call the Whole Thing Off', *Shall We Dance?*, film, RKO Pictures, 1937.
 8. Barthes, p. 54.
 9. Barthes, p. 55.
 10. Ilya Prigogine, quoted in Ash Hartwell, 'Scientific Ideas and Education in the 21st Century', 21st Century Learning Initiative, <<http://www.21learn.org/arch/articles/ash-complexity.html>>.
 11. Linda Neil, *The New Passion Club*, Compact Disc, Lulablissmusic, 2001.
 12. Barthes, p. 55.
 13. Barthes, p. 61.
 14. Barthes, p. 62.
 15. Neil.
 16. Barthes, p. 67.