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Hearing Study #6

I tried to listen for the sound of speech. I tried to listen to new words. Kye-ev. Oligarch. Omicron. Lviv. Kleptocratic.

And then the rain blurred the detail. The weight of white noise smothered the nuance, timbre, and spectral information inside the speech. I couldn’t listen to the sound of speech because it was raining. Speech affected by masks. Speech affected by rain. Our listening has changed.

This was not usual rain – which in a sub-tropical climate dumps enormous amounts of water in 30 – 120 minutes. In that kind of rain you cannot listen to detail in speech either, but you simply wait until it is over. And then you listen inside the sound of speech, the journey of a sound, the unique sonic signature of each and every speaker.

But in this kind of rain it started and did not stop. It started sometime while I was sleeping, strong and steady. It kept going during the day – I worked from home, had meetings “on-line” apologising that it was difficult to hear, moved my office downstairs further away from the tin roof. Queenslanders (kweenzlaandaz) are wooden boxes – giant resonators. Add metal to the roof and there is a constant source of sound created by different densities of droplets falling from an incredible height, and the difference between Ki-ev and Ky-ev is difficult to focus on.

It continued to rain that night too. Not stopping. Ever. Repetition. The next day we stayed off the roads and only walked places – mostly to the river to see where all the water was going. I don’t use headphones outside – I like to listen. A constant dense sound varied only by the surfaces it came in contact with.

That night it kept raining. This sound had been going non-stop for 48 hours now. Like living right next to crashing waves. Living right next to a waterfall. Living right next to a freeway with no diurnal change. Just loud enough to negate the possibility of any foregrounded, focused listening – as is needed for conversation. Reading time expanded. Nothing time expanded. Wringing towel time expanded to an hourly activity. I slept downstairs with an alarm set on the hour to get up and wring towels to protect the downstairs from seepage – water has to go somewhere. Repetition, wringing water from the floor to the bathtub.

It kept raining.

Each day, for 3 x 24 hours in a row it rained 238mm. Over 700mm in total. Constant, unceasing.

Somewhere, around 80 hours in, it stopped.

I am a listener – it makes me so happy to notice things in sound, to pay attention. I awoke into a new idea of silence. The absence of rain. Th absence of traffic – long since stopped as residents were required to stay home or already evacuated. Absence of birds whose wings were too wet to take flight. Absence of insects – waterlogged. Much electricity was off – limited humming from buildings.

In my refreshed ears I began to hear. I began to hear Kie-ev,Kee-ef, Kee-yiv, oligarch, O-Lu-Gaak, Ali-Gark, Lviv, Laveev, l’viv, but also the flood affected areas of Rocklea, Goodna, Grantham and then down to Myocum, Mullumbimby, Murwillumbah.