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TINNITUS

The electronic voice said it was normal to talk aloud to oneself during the pandemic. But what about responding to the device, or addressing an acknowledgement or imprecation to the others when they sound off in one way or another, the microwave, refrigerator, phone, computer all programmed with musical motifs or ceaselessly repetitive audio patterns of chirps or clucks or other oddly trivial aural tics meant to alert or alarm or simply apprise one of an errant situation or incoming message from without, confronted as one is by an endless series of auto-generated notifications that even when genuine mean nothing except perhaps revenue for someone else. And what if the circumstances change? What if things got worse before they got better, as everyone seems to predict? Or only worse? No word on any of that from there. And from within? Sitting in isolation, as one does as one waits more or less alone at this point for an appointment for a vaccination, the apparent solution to the obvious problem confronting us all, deny it or not, one can obstruct or turn off or just fucking ignore only so much noise.

And what if the younger man with the lilting Caribbean accent was simply expressing a universal truth when he told the anger-management group back in the day that he heard voices in his head? Yes, he needed individual help, as the consensus led by the balding leader concluded in a cheap suit jacket. But we all did and do. Because I hear voices, too. But I don't mistake them for those of god or the devil or someone on their

teams. No, they're mine again, clear enough though only vaguely audible. And merely the enraging sounds of the aging brain.

Too many questions undermine your thesis, a colleague of mine once advised. But to remain mum when one lacks answers leaves an uncomfortable silence within one's own four walls, uncomfortable because it is anything but complete as sirens and insane songs and blasts of automotive horn and exhaust pierce the air. At first there was also an evening ritual of public celebration -- applause, shouting, whistling, cheering, pot-banging and other public noisemaking outside on the street by local inhabitants who emerged from their doors at precisely seven PM in recognition of the efforts of "essential" workers -- but all of that seemed to abruptly and completely cease after the death of a Black man in Minneapolis by the hands of the police that spawned public protests around the nation and much of the rest of the world.

Contact is more limited now. Colleagues? Slack, Zoom. Friends? Email. Children, former wife, ex-girlfriends? Texts. Not that there were many even of these before, but now they were rapidly dwindling. Still, there is the occasional phone conversation with women contacted via dating sites, the latest a filmmaker who identified herself with a name different from the one she used for email. She forthrightly claimed to be eager to meet despite the pandemic but disappeared without warning beforehand for what she later said were "shoots." These involved, she explained, video interviews with a North Korean woman whose son had escaped to China and then to Laos and ultimately Thailand, where he was being held by the authorities pending vaguely defined diplomatic efforts, according to the "broker" who served as an intermediary for a price. The North Korean's interest in submitting to these interviews would toggle wildly based on the latest news the broker provided: The mother would abruptly withdraw when prospects for her son's release from detention in Bangkok supposedly improved and come forward again without warning when they were said to have dimmed.

At the filmmaker's suggestion I sent her a piece I'd written about a former writing instructor who had died of Parkinson's, which she eventually claimed to think highly of, terming it "beautiful" and "insightful," and to want to discuss. I thanked her profusely and asked where I might find a sample of her work but never heard back and try as I might could not locate anything via the internet associated with any of the names she'd given me, first or last. And then she failed to respond to further texts and was no longer responsive via the website.

Another woman who did make-up for luminaries in the local news and entertainment industry expressed little besides breathless anxiety in an agitated voice about her current existence, which saw her rarely venture out of her apartment near Union Square, especially after dark, less in fear of Covid than of the riots that had broken out over the killing in Minneapolis and subsequent ones, and so painted small watercolors of imaginary locations to pass the time between appointments. The only thing she wanted to know about me was whether I was seeing anyone else. After assuring her that I was not, which was true at that particular moment, I promised to arrange to meet her but had no intention of doing so.

Yet another woman I met on a site, a widowed writer of children's books who lived in Connecticut, gave me the distinct impression, her voice genuinely dulcet, of wanting to meet once the pandemic was over, having expressed in sweetly wistful tones her fond recollection of her dead husband's beloved habit of reading aloud to her every evening, and to want to remain in touch until then, but the next time I tried to contact her she seemed to have deleted her details from the site, which relieved me to some degree since I didn't relish the prospect of competing with memories of the dead.

To be sure, my latest ex occasionally phones to chat, and frequently insists that my hearing is failing. The last time this occurred, she offered to take me to see an audiologist once the pandemic is over.

For now, a more pronounced volume of random birdsong can be detected, inviting one to listen to its erratic rhythms while gazing out the window at the ebbing tide of light, the perfect rectangles of other windows and doors sitting starkly in contrast within the perfect rectangle of glass refracting the dwindling sun or lit from within, the horizontal and vertical giving way at last to the vague rejoinders of what remains of the natural world. The ringing in the inner ear grows louder amid the relative though unsettled hush. Yet sounds become words and words become this.