

Audience

Jack Womack

Jack Womack (b. 1956) is probably better known as a writer of dark and baroque science fiction such as Ambient (1987) and Heathern (1990), but once in a while he turns his hand to a more subtle canvas. Long ago H. G. Wells wrote "The Magic Shop" (1903), about a place that sells genuine magic tricks. Since then there has been a steady trickle of stories about such magical places. Check out Avram Davidson's anthology Magic for Sale (1983) for plenty of examples. Here's one of the latest and certainly more unusual.

SMALL MUSEUMS IN LARGE CITIES INEVITABLY ATTRACT me whenever I travel. Their haphazard assemblages - randomly displayed in no evident pattern, fitfully identified by yellowing cards - on occasion contain items so memorably unsettling as thereafter to blot from the mind the holdings of the Smithsonian, or Hermitage, or Louvre. I happened upon such a place one afternoon while strolling in the Low City, near the Margarethestrasse, down an alley branching off St Jermyn's Close. The surrounding rows of soot-shrouded houses leaned into their dank passageway; their roofs caressed rather than touched, and their shadows shut away their inhabitants from notions of time or season. Overlooking all was the close's six-spired cathedral, which itself served, until the recent political upheavals, as the Museum of Atheistic Belief. The cathedral's carillons proclaimed the fifteenth hour as I knocked at the door of the Hall of Lost Sounds, and for a moment I feared that, in their din, my own would go unheard.

"Thank you for seeing me," the curator said as I entered. I would have guessed him to be no older than seventy. His voice held the measured resonance of a cello, and he declaimed his notes almost in the manner of a *Sprechstimmer*.

"How much?" I asked. He shook his head. "You don't charge admission?"

"Who would come?"

A wholly unrecognizable accent misted his words. Much about his place appeared medieval, but then, so did its district - while wandering its byways, I'd thought I could as well have come armed with halberd rather than backpack, ducking the splash of chamber pots and not the offers of touts. The curator lingered in his museum's antechamber as if awaiting some necessary cue before our tour could begin, and we listened to the cathedral bells clanging out their last.

"It must hearten," I offered, "hearing them again after so long."

"No other noise assaults my walls," he said. "Lost sounds are sometimes better left lost. I keep only those which tickle your ear like a lover's tongue."

The curator gestured that we should begin, and we entered the museum proper. Wooden planks attached at floor and ceiling, aligned along the left wall, partitioned half of the first room into alcoves. "Each space possesses its own eigentone," he said.

"Pardon?" I said.

"Excuse me. The reflections within are accurate, and in accordance with acoustic principles. If the audience can be satisfied, it will be."

An iron bouquet was affixed to the door frame. The curator tugged at one of its sprigs, and fire leaped hissing from the cardinal blossom. The creamy light revealed a coiled, valveless horn resembling a golden snake. Retrieving it from its cubicle, he cradled the instrument in his arms as if it were his sister's baby.

"A posthorn," he said. "The mail came four times daily, the nature of each delivery denoted by unvarying leitmotifs." Pressing its mouthpiece against his lips, the curator blew three clear, ascending notes, each possessing an oddly pitched, yet not unattractive tone. "Such music, heard across miles, foretold of letters from your lover." Lifting the horn again, he played another short series, in a sharper key. "That prepared you to receive unforeseen gifts." He coughed until his lungs rattled; then replaced the

horn within its enclosure. "Every signal, continually heard from childhood into age, was as familiar as a mother's voice. Once the deliveries ended, it was decreed that the posthorn should never again be played by anyone."

"You just played it," I said.

He nodded. "In a different country. Let us go on." The next cubicle held a black telephone, its sleek skin unblemished by touchpads, screen, or dial. Two short, tintinnabulate bursts shattered the moment's stillness as unexpectedly as a mandrake's cry. "It's for you," the curator said.

When I lifted the receiver to my ear I heard a woman, speaking with a voice infused with a semblance of life. "Rhineland Exchange," she said, pronouncing each syllable with equal emphasis. "Number, please."

"Cities were divided into Exchanges," the curator said as I hung up. "While the operator made your connection, you'd hear a musical passage chosen to best represent the Exchange dialled. My wife lived in Endicott before we married, and whenever I'd call, I'd hear passages from Messiaen, awaiting her hello."

"That's remarkable."

He smiled. "After we married we lived in Hansa, and friends listened to Webern until we answered. I should now make a point concerning historical accuracy. Your immediate experience notwithstanding, the telephone would of course have rung only if someone called you. My exhibits merely approximate a sound's original context."

"The operator's accent was the same as yours," I said. "What is your native language?"

"Lost," he said. "I should say, it's been years since I've had need to speak it."

"I've never heard such an accent before."

"And now you have," said the curator, passing through a doorway into another dim room. I followed. Though I didn't see precisely where tile supplanted the flooring's wood, I felt, before I heard, the transformation underfoot. In the centre of the room was a small round table; on the table's marble top, an antique coffee grinder and porcelain candelabra holding a single, slender candle. He pulled one of two wrought-iron chairs away from the table, scraping the legs across the tile with the sound of many fingernails drawn along a blackboard.

"Sit," he said, lighting the candle; its wax crackled and snapped as the wick caught fire. As I sat, raking the other chair's iron over that ceramic floor, the curator shut his eyes, sealing himself against all distractions, and listened as if to a wombed heartbeat, his look assuring that, by dint of concentration, he would suck the sound dry of vibration before it could decay.

"Before they closed them all, my wife and I went to the cafes every evening, along with everyone else. We were quite social, once," he said, spinning the grinder's crank. "The waiter ground the beans at your table before preparing your coffee. We sat for hours, eating and talking and listening to music. Most establishments employed musicians, that their harmonics might lend melody to the crowd's drone. None of the songs was ever recorded. Transcriptions were on occasion made, but afterwards, all were effaced."

"Why?"

"Because we loved them," he said. "As the evening drew on, the older patrons went along their way, leaving behind only younger couples still uncertain whether each best suited the other. At midnight, at the hour conversation settles into the whispers of those making love with words, the oublovium player came forward to take her solo."

From a bag hidden beneath the table, the curator withdrew a wooden cylinder, turned with the symmetries of an hourglass. Leaning the blunt upper end of the instrument against his collarbone, crooking one arm around its mid-section, he placed the lower, open end in his lap. Then he lifted from his bag the oublovium's apparent bow, a thin rod no longer than the oublovium itself, its form reminiscent of a dandelion, tipped not with seeds but with a ball of fine wire. Inserting its tuft into the opening, the curator slid the pole along unseen strings within the instrument, rolling the rod's length between his fingers as he drew it in and out. The notes produced bore the closest affinity to those of a harp, played at impossible

tempo with a multitude of hands.

"I could as well sit at a piano and strike at the keyboard with my elbows," he said. "Anyone could make such trifling motions as these, but there were few virtuosi. Women, solely, mastered the oubloviom. No one plays it today. I doubt that anyone would recognize it if they saw one."

"But who closed the cafes?"

If the curator knew, perhaps he no longer had reason to tell. He shook his head, and returned his instrument to his bag. "One day they were there, and the next, they weren't."

He redirected his attentions, undoubtedly anticipating that he would be aware of the subsequent attraction before I would. The room in which we sat seemed smaller than it was, and felt ever more so the longer we sat there, but before my vague discomfort hardened into claustrophobia, I took notice of a bright, pellucid sound overhead; a faint tinkling, a clatter of miniature cymbals. Staring up I saw a mobile attached to the ceiling, made up of shiny glass shards hanging by threads, clinking together as they twirled in the candle-warmed air.

"Trams ran throughout the cities," he continued. "A staff protruded from the prow of each car, above the engine driver's window. Chimes such as those were tied to the end of each staff, and as the cars raced down the tracks, the wind signalled to those waiting at the next stop ahead, promising that their patience would be shortly rewarded. On maps, the tramlines were identified by the spectral colours, and each car's hue matched its line.

"Upon boarding, you dropped your gold token into a black fare box. When it issued your receipt, the box thanked you, not in words but with a sound truly lost. All I can offer is a description, bearing less relation to its actuality than a dead lover's lock of hair bears to the head from which it grew." The curator stood, motioning that I should do the same. "The mechanism's three notes comprised an ascending diatonic triad, impressing itself into the ear as a chirp rather than a chord, in intonation closer to a cricket's than to a bird's, yet louder, as if the insect nestled unseen within your clothing while it sang." He paused. "Can you hear it?" Before I might answer, he went on. "I've saved what could be saved, but so much was lost. If no one knows a tree falls in the forest, the question shouldn't be did it fall? but, was it there before it fell?"

We moved into another room as he spoke. There were three tiny windows on our right, admitting no purer light than might have eked through at sunset, in winter, on a cloudy day. Once more my shoes slid across a surface of altered texture; the clack of my heels reverberated against the walls with hollow echoes, and when I glanced down I saw what appeared, in the gloom, as bleached cobblestones, or the small skulls of babies.

"We rode the Blue Line, going to the seashore. At the beachfront was the spa, which was built of plum-coloured bricks and had 900 rooms. People came from all around to enjoy the waters. A promenade encircled the spa, and ran as well down to the dockside. Seashells were used to pave their walkways, and those of the quays. Travellers inevitably remarked on our city's soundless sea, thinking the breakers pounded silently against the sand. Throughout the day and into the night the surf went unheard beneath the footsteps of thousands strolling over the shells. It's curious to realize that the only one of our sounds visitors recalled, afterwards, was one they never heard.

"Every summer night when the Guildhall's clock struck ten, the Ensemble Pyrotechnique undertook their most elaborate works on the strand. We'd sit on the public terraces overlooking the ocean and watch them fire their flowers into heaven. It was on one such night I proposed to my wife. Each year, on our anniversary, we'd ride the Blue Line to the seashore, each time remembering where we'd been, each time giving thanks for where we had come, blessing that moment from that time on until there was no time left."

I'd only imagined the cry of the fare box; now, enveloping myself within the curator's descriptions, feeling seashells beneath my feet, allowing his recollections to mingle with my own, I heard the fireworks bursting with the wet pop of flashbulbs exploding in the lamps of old cameras. That a memory of sound could so intrude into the physical world wasn't surprising in itself; who hasn't heard a fragment of a hated

song and, hours later, still found it there, as impacted as a bean in the ear of a child? What was not so much unexpected as unnatural was the perceived immediacy of fireworks; of the bitter tang of gunpowder, of peripheral flashes glimpsed between my horizon and the beamed ceiling's azimuth. Shutting my eyes, I heard an unseen sea's unheard heartbeat.

"The shells were removed concurrently with the tramlines," the curator said, tapping the floor with the toe of his shoe. "The Guildhall was demolished. The spa was burned to the ground."

"Why?" I asked. "What happened?" As my words bounced from the walls back into my ears, I discerned an unaccountable lowering of the timbre of my voice, and a seeming dislocation of the direction from which it came. Some acoustic anomaly, or eigentonic flaw - perhaps accidental, perhaps not - was likely responsible; yet the unsettling impression that my voice no longer came from within me, but from somewhere without, heightened my awareness of how it might feel to have my own sound taken away. I hadn't experience enough then, nor do I now, to estimate how much I would thereafter miss it. "I don't understand."

"Nor did we," he said. "Unfortunately, but unavoidably, the remainder of the museum is quite dark. Take care, hereout."

"Where is your country?" I asked; receiving no reply, I rephrased my question. "Where was it?"

He answered only by guiding me towards another room. Stepping into its twilight, I heard our shoes crunching against the floor as if, having drifted without warning into another world's stronger gravity, our bodies increased in mass, compressing all underfoot. The resulting sound was identical to one included in my own collection, but I knew of no method by which the curator could have carpeted this chamber with snow.

"In this country, the image of winter bears faint relation to its verity," he said. "In the country I knew, each season was distinguished as much by its sounds as by its climate. Most of those were not so much lost as misplaced, and so I leave their acquisition to others. In my country, the seasons so differed from one to the next that, in some years, we might have been living successively on four dissimilar planets."

The curator stopped, and together we stood in the dark. At first I thought the continuing sound of our footsteps to be nothing more than sustained echoes. "Our weather changed before we did. One year snow fell in September. We foresaw a hard winter ahead. It was, but not because of the weather, for it never snowed again."

The rhythm of the ongoing footsteps quickened, increasing in volume as well as number until it seemed we were encroached upon by multitudes. If their stamp was but a recorded beat, as I thought it must be, its verisimilitude was nonetheless so perfect that only a single taping could have separated sound from source. The curator's face was obscured by shadow, and I was unable to gather from his reaction how I should respond to the perfection of his masters.

"Our national bird flocked in such numbers as to block out the afternoon sun."

An abrupt fluttering rose and roared around us. I instinctively braced myself, to keep from being blown over by that avian hurricane, but then realized that this room's sonic properties misled me once again; even my hair remained unruffled in the feathery gale. The swift bombardment from above served as an appropriate counterpoint to the unremitting ground attack.

"Their popular name was the pococurante," said the curator. "The populace favoured Voltaire. The birds nested in our birch forests every spring, arriving in clouds, snapping off tree limbs beneath their cumulative weight. Pococurantes were greyish blue, and the males had yellow heads and scarlet bellies. Their mottled eggs had a fishy flavour, though the birds themselves tasted something like chicken. The call of the pococurante was inoffensive, and familiar to all."

He mimed its song, whistling two notes; the first higher, and allegro, the second lower, and largo, an onomatopoeic *uh-oh* in the key of E flat.

"Pococurantes coupled for life. If one died, the survivor mourned its mate, refusing to fly away until it, too, was killed. Their numbers declined rapidly after the trees were chopped down. When the remaining birds set off upon their last migration, they were blasted from the sky until their blood fell like

rain. The last time I heard a pococurante, I was half the age I am now." Though his face remained cloaked, through the darkness I perceived his smile, and its ambiguity. "That was also the first time I heard one."

"Would you repeat their call for me?" I asked.

"Certainly."

Attuning my ear to the chords of extinction, I knew an illuminatory moment. An unlikely admixture of sorrow, fear, and nostalgia for another's memories irrupted through my spirit, and as I considered the criteria by which donations might be judged worthy of a Hall of Lost Sounds, I pictured seventeenth-century explorers lying sleepless during their first night on Mauritius, kept awake by the squawk of dodos; imagined Manhattanites, in the thirties, grabbing instinctively for their glassware as the El rumbled up Sixth Avenue; tried to recall the intonation of my prepubescent voice. Some sounds one surely expected always to hear, and so never listened at the time they were made; perhaps inevitably those noises thought most unendurable when initially heard only later proved the most precious, and most irrecoverable.

"You like that one?" Before I could state my affirmation, his thoughts wandered elsewhere; I doubt that he cared. "I hear it now as you hear me."

The curator led me to the far side of the room. Cries of pococurante and drum of quickstep waned, overwhelmed by a thunderous fusillade, so loud that I guessed the rest of the tour would be delivered with gestures. Still, over sharp reports of creaking wood, against an unceasing advance of caissons bumping across stone, I heard him plainly, as if he stood in a lecture hall, addressing an audience of one.

"Long before the disruptions began, delivery carts were used in our cities to conserve fuel," the curator said. "They were pressed into general service to speed our own migration. Much of what a house contained that was important could be hauled by the largest carriages. Whatever their size, the wagons never held enough. When I left, I carried my belongings with me."

However chimerical its nature, the crash of a thousand inessential wagons hurtling towards us so unnerved me that with each pass I flinched, attempting to avoid an onslaught I knew was evanescent. Without benefit of imagination, I heard horses neighing when whips cracked against their withers; drivers shouting out curses over the groan of their loads. I pretend no understanding of sonology, but I thought it impossible that any phonographic agency could so truly reproduce such pandemonium; I felt that through some subtle technique I heard those sounds exactly as he did when they ricocheted off the walls of his skull. Possibly that was his trick, or what he wished me to believe was his trick, that he drew from his mind at command recollections so assiduously cherished as to have developed an alternate existence, nearly independent of his own. A suitable audience could be therefore gratified, assured that not only had there been a tree which fell, but that the sound it made upon falling would echo through its forest unto eternity.

"Why did you have to leave your country?" I asked.

"She left me," he said. "I should have preferred to stay. Come along, now."

Grateful to be removed from the earsplitting tumult, I followed the curator and we entered a brighter, quieter hall. In the ceiling's elliptical dome was an oculus, threaded with a strand of light. Two doors faced us, one open, one closed. Gazing into the visible threshold's abyss, I saw neither exhibits nor even room beyond. The curator stopped, and we went no further.

"My wife and I were awakened one night by sirens," he said. "We opened our windows and watched the spa burn down. In keeping with the season we tried to reimagine what we saw as a Hallowe'en spectacle, and shuddered at the vision of black skeletons silhouetted against an orange field. But sorrow overwhelmed our disregard of what we knew to be real, and we returned to bed, unsuccessful in our attempts to transform a funeral into a holiday. It was only the week before that we'd sat on the beachfront terraces, enjoying the fireworks, leaving before we'd intended with every expectation of returning when we wished.

"The next morning we rode our bicycles to the beach, anxious to look at ruins other than our own.

On the way we passed the avenue's empty shops, where haberdashers and tobacconists, watchmakers and smiths, joiners and cobblers and ostlers plied their trades long before our grandparents were born. The cafes were shuttered. Gilt and neon signs were covered over by billboards telling of unfamiliar people and places. So crowded with those departing was the Central Station that the passengers' clamour muted that of their trains. We reached the seashore. The ashes had mixed with the sand, and as we walked over them we listened to the ocean, hearing it anew, if not for the first time. Its swell terrified my wife, and we walked our cycles home, bereft of emotion, feeling too drained to race back uphill. That morning, all anyone knew was rumours and lies, and what wasn't said didn't matter as much as what wasn't done. My country was taken from us, though if not with our wishes, then undoubtedly with dutiful acquiescence.

"Couples living in such circumstances so often find their challenges insurmountable. We talked of what we might do. All we could do was talk, and try to make the other listen. We drifted apart, all the while wanting to stay together. One day, sooner than expected, I came home to find her gone."

His expression remained unchanged as he weaved his words around me. A softer sound, its origin as enigmatic as the rest, insinuated itself into my ears, a steady uninflected jingling, heard as if it came from far beneath the floor.

"You can always speak to one who isn't there, of course, as long as you don't expect answers," the curator said. "We planted pinwheels in our gardens in memory of the dead. Miniature sleigh bells were attached to their vanes, so that when the wind spun the wheels around, the souls they honoured would ascend with a soothing accompaniment."

Though his face evinced no untoward emotion - nor, in fact, any emotion at all - I perceived that he felt he should cry, even if he no longer could. The sound of his sorrow was evidently one he had been unable, or unwilling, to preserve. "Though the past survives only through its artefacts," he said, "every museum must limit its acquisitions."

"Your country," I said. "Your wife. Where are they?" Taking my arm, he walked the short distance across the hall with me, and pointed to the open door.

"Listen."

Craning my head towards its darkness, I heard not silence, but the absence of sound. Staring into that void, straining to catch noises that simply weren't there, I better comprehended the true worth of his collection and how irreplaceable it would be, once it was lost. He'd deliberately left vague the magnitude of his tragedy; what else of his world was he unable to save? Did he miss what he had retained all the more? Could any public loss be greater than any private one, or did one inescapably serve as no more than grace note to the other, if they happened to coincide?

The curator began singing a tune of unsettling pitch, his notes wobbling in and out of key. The words were, I suppose, in his original tongue, a speech engorged with glottal phrasings, surprising syllabic leaps and discordant cadences, bearing no relation to any language I've heard before, or since. After a single verse and chorus, he stopped. "Our song," he told me. "The last exhibit of my museum."

As he concluded his sentence, the cathedral bells rang out the sixteenth hour, shaking the walls with sonorous peals. The curator grimaced, showing even less appreciation of their auditory terrorism. Once the toll concluded he directed me to the other door. "Now I hear my wife's voice," he said, unlatching the lock, easing me forward. "Thank you for hearing mine."

Before I could reply, he closed the door behind me. I found myself in afternoon sunlight, some distance from the alley, deafened by Gaon Prospect's cacophony — the roars of its buses and taxis and trucks, the chants of its hawkers.

Children screamed at one another, police blew whistles, car alarms blared, and a thousand radios bleated across the encompassing dissonance of Montrouge.

There were numerous cafes on the Prospect and, selecting one of more subdued ambience than the rest, I took a seat and ordered currant genever. Late into the evening I rifled the accessions of my own museum, replaying sounds as I came upon them. Too many of its holdings were unavailable, however

diligent the search, but the sole surprise was that they'd been stolen with such ease; if I hadn't looked, I'd have never missed them. A friend of mine, a composer, once spoke to me of Webern: how in his music the rests contribute as much, if not more, as the notes; that having a sense of what was missing made all the clearer what remained. Until that afternoon I'd preferred tunes more easily mastered. The curator's songs stuck closer to me than I thought desirable, and only with some effort did I erase them from my mind.