

# TEAR IN THE THROAT

by

JEFFREY CHRISTOPHER FALLIS

(Under the Direction of Ed Pavlic)

## ABSTRACT

A creative dissertation that investigates the complexity of the human voice and its relationship to language, music, and song through a combination of poetry, memoir, critical essays, drama, and prose fragments. The dissertation focuses on the anatomy and mechanics of the voice, scat singing and doo-wop's nonsense syllables, the voice and its restrictions in the architecture of song, and the human voice and its connection to the animal and celestial.

INDEX WORDS: Voice, American popular music, Van Morrison, Federico Garcia Lorca

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## DEDICATIONS

To my committee for their patience and their guidance.

To my parents for their longstanding and unwavering support.

To Daniel Citro for good ideas and advice about the Beatles and Bataille.

To Caroline Young for the insinuation of interstellar possibilities.

To Kevin Young for tips on how to play the long game.

To Teddy for necessary distraction.

And, finally, to Jennifer Bogdanich, with love, for love: I couldn't have done it without  
you.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
1 CRITICAL INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 AUDIBLE AIR.....	17
3 SCAT-LOGY.....	41
REFERENCES .....	68

## CHAPTER 1

### CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

The idea for the form of the dissertation existed long before I actually understood what its subject matter would be. I still love poetry and think of myself as primarily a poet, but I wanted to use the occasion of the creative dissertation to try my hand at something challenging and uncomfortable. I felt that I knew how to write a certain type of poem too well, and I wanted to take a break until I knew how to write another type of poem — I feared the prospect of repeating myself, of running on empty. Investigating other genres seemed the logical next step. (I'm still in the middle of writing a play.) I had imagined writing a long-form, investigative, experimental book that blurred the line between nonfiction and poetry (and other genres too) for a while, but I was unsure how to go about actually writing it. I didn't know how to begin, for one thing — did I simply start composing, without a plan? Should there be a detailed outline? Would such a detailed outline murder the improvisatory nature of the enterprise in its crib before it even started breathing; would it stymie the lightning storm I was courting before it had the chance to strike?

Early notes of mine about the project are concerned with the necessity of finding a new way of working, a new methodology: “1.) Change work schedule. Block out time/schedule that will allow for a quantity of work. Block out the time (2 hrs. a day, 4-5 days a week). 2.) Pick a project & run with it. Give yrself certain amt. of time. Set goals. 20 pgs. of this. 15 pgs. of that 3.) Try to write something discontinuous. – Dionysian in structure – Like *Spring & All!* - Shift in time from section to section w/out cues.” And, crossed out for some reason, a directive that would become more important as I approached the end of the project: ~~“Fight the round ending.”~~

Later in the notebook, more obliquely, I find these disconnected phrases:

“memory palace”                      “human sensorium”                      “A        MESMERISM        BOOK”

“DETOUR INTO MEMORY PALACE/VOICE”    “EXPLODING POETICS”

“Go down the throat into the underworld”

and, finally,

“THE BAYING OF THE HOUND.”

Somewhere in all of this, you can make out the beginnings of the lineaments of the enterprise, just barely...

At around the same time that I was writing these phrases in my notebook and making numerous false starts on the first few sections of *Tear in the Throat*, I was teaching two books in my creative writing workshop that, looking back, were especially influential upon *Tear*'s final shape. These two volumes of “creative nonfiction” were Maggie Nelson’s 2009 *Bluets* and David Shields’s 2010 *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*. (The publishing categories on the backs of the two books intrigued me: while the Shields is recommended to be shelved under the more straightforward “LITERARY CRITICISM” category, Nelson’s blurs together and finds itself stuck between different sections of the bookstore: “ESSAY/LITERATURE.”) Both books consist of hundreds of sequentially numbered sections of prose, and both are intentionally hybrid works; *Bluets* is part philosophical essay, part memoir, and part prose poetry, whereas *Reality Hunger*, most of which consists of reconstituted and reappropriated material from other sources, is more concerned with troubling the line between fiction and nonfiction, and raising questions about the validity and nature of contemporary distinctions between appropriation and plagiarism. I found Shields’s mostly self-serving arguments about things like copyright, remixes, and outdated Romantic conceptions of personality and authorship mildly interesting, albeit ultimately unconvincing and not a little outdated themselves. What I did find useful, however, was the actual form of the book *Reality Hunger*, as well as the formal discussions within the text in favor of collage and the lyric essay.

*Reality Hunger* is a patchwork of neatly curated and numbered quotations (uncited within the text until the closing appendix) from hundreds of different authors and sources (Thoreau, Barthes, Benjamin, W.G. Sebald, T.S. Eliot, Michelangelo, Goethe, Virginia Woolf, Anne Carson, Bob Dylan *et al.*, *et al.*) interspersed with “original” material by Shields himself, arranged in an accretive, centripetal fashion (yes, like a collage) into chapters entitled things like “mimesis,” “reality,” “memory,” “contradiction,” and “risk.” I liked the way Shields’s disparate sources bumped up against and collided with each other, sometimes in agreement and sometimes in conflict, and I liked the surprising juxtapositions that resulted — Nietzsche talking to Montaigne arguing with Joan Didion air-quoting Sonny Rollins. I appreciated conceptually what Shields was doing with his unattributed quotes, but I found myself checking the appendix too often once I figured out the book’s method, and ultimately chose to forego such manner of “love and theft” in my own work. Shields’s praise of the collage and the lyric essay as innovative forms that could “embody and convey the fractured nature of contemporary existence” (to quote the paperback’s jacket copy) did stick with me, though, and helped establish the parameters and blueprints for *Tear in the Throat*. Three quotations from *Reality Hunger*’s chapter on collage proved particularly generative: Donald Kuspit’s “Collage is a demonstration of the many becoming the one, with the one never fully resolved because of the many that continue to impinge upon it” (112), Picasso’s “A great painting comes together, just barely” (116), and Adorno’s “The usual reproach against the essay, that it is fragmentary and random, itself assumes the givenness of the totality and suggests that man is in control of this totality. The desire of the essay, though, is not to filter the eternal out of the transitory; it wants, rather, to make the transitory eternal” (121). I envisioned a work that was in part a collage, with a through argument that kept getting interrupted or impinged upon, a work that just barely held together

(by what I imagined as a network of correspondences and resonances rather than by conventional organization and logistics), a work that was able to make the transitory eternal. (I didn't know yet that my subject matter, the human voice, was among the most magically and maddeningly transitory phenomena of all.)

I admit that I wasn't exactly familiar with the concept of the lyric essay as such before reading Shields's book, but I liked the sound of it the more I read about it and realized that much of the nonfiction I'd enjoyed the most in recent years could roughly be categorized as lyric essays. I also sensed that such a form was the type of nonfiction I might actually be predisposed to *write*. Shields leans heavily on "sampled" material from John D'Agata in his discussion of the lyric essay, and these two long quotations from different D'Agata essays included in *Reality Hunger* are ones I starred, machetes that helped uncover a path through the jungle for me:

The lyric essay doesn't expound, is suggestive rather than exhaustive, depends on gaps, may merely mention. It might move by association, leaping from one path of thought to another by way of imagery or connotation, advancing by juxtaposition or sidwinding poetic logic. It often accretes by fragments, taking shape mosaically, its import visible only when one stands back and sees it whole. It partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language, and partakes of the essay in its weight, its overt desire to engage with facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form. It gives primacy to artfulness over the conveying of information, forsaking narrative line, discursiveness, and the art of persuasion in favor of idiosyncratic meditation. Generally, it's short, concise, and punchy, like a prose poem. It may, though, meander, making use of other genres when they serve its purpose, sampling the techniques of fiction, drama, journalism, song, and film.

(130). And from the end of Shields's book, more poetically: "[Lyric essays] are hybrids that perch on the fence between the willed and the felt. A lyric essay is an oxymoron: an essay that's also a lyric, a kind of logic that wants to sing, an argument that has no chance of proving out"

(204). So, a combination of collage and the lyric essay: a long prose piece that partook of many

of the same freedoms and techniques as poetry: the perfect model for a poet trying to write nonfiction for the first time. The form took vague shape in my mind's void.

If *Reality Hunger* went a long way towards naming and identifying the form I wanted to use, then Nelson's *Bluets* was my prime example of the form itself. Equally whip-smart and emotionally daring, *Bluets* approaches its ostensible subject matter, the color blue, from angles oblique, direct, backwards, right, head-on, and sideways. Nelson incorporates the aesthetic, theoretical, historical, personal, intellectual, metaphysical, affective, and (viscerally) sensual alike into the framework of her discussion with a sense of freedom and ever-shifting momentum that allows the book to maintain the shock of the new even upon multiple rereads. Shields names *Bluets* as one of the fifty-five works he "swear[s] by" (140) in his 2013 follow-up to *Reality Hunger*, *How Literature Saved My Life*, and he calls the book a "brief meditation on the color blue, a cri de coeur about Nelson's inability to get over the end of a love affair, and a grievous contemplation of a close friend's paralysis... [that] keeps getting larger and larger until it winds up being about nothing less than the melancholy of the human animal" (151). And even that description only partially describes the scope of the book, which packs so much into its brief ninety-five pages.

I admired *Bluets*' ferocity, and I admired the way it managed to attain great range (of feeling, thought, and reference) while remaining stylistically compact and concise. Nelson never belabors the many points she makes; she simply makes them and moves on, quickly, unexpectedly, vertiginously, at times contradictorily. I didn't want to replicate exactly the numerical format of Nelson's book (explicitly modeled after Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*) in my own work — such a direct imitation seemed redundant and unwise — but I did want to capture something of the restless way *Bluets* moved and argued with itself, the way it

wasn't afraid to undercut its own propositions and lay waste to its own set of assured niceties. (I don't think I necessarily achieved this, but it was the ideal I had in mind.) In *Bluets*, encounters with paintings, novels, songs, and philosophy are given equal weight with dreams, faculty meetings, hotel room trysts, moments of boredom, and moments of terrible physical and emotional pain; no single mode of being is privileged over another, and consequently everything feels up for grabs. The high-low juxtapositions, the circling back on its own arguments, the way that the book proceeds according to conventional, straightforward (albeit frequently disrupted and discontinuous) propositions, *as well as* by a process of accretion and accumulation: that's the type of book I wanted to write, that's what I took away from *Bluets*, along with the intuition that any subject matter, focused on and spun out in such a manner, might be inexhaustible. Even though Nelson ends *Bluets* with a lament for her collection of blue's seeming "anemia" (91) — and quotes Wittgenstein about the brevity of the only book he published in his lifetime: "As to the shortness of the book I am *awfully sorry for it; but what can I do?* If you were to squeeze me like a lemon you would get nothing more out of me" (91)) — I took away from the book a sense of amplitude, an impression of (compacted) scope that uncovered expansive avenues of thought and made directed forays in multiple compasses worth of unforeseen, wildly spinning directions. (Side note: I also liked the way in which the chronology of the book's composition was written into its narrative; thus, *Tear in the Throat* appears more or less in the order in which it was conceived.)

Not much about David Shields's writerly persona is endearing, but one thing is: his enthusiasm as a recommender of those books that he "swears by." One of the most useful things about *Reality Hunger* and *How Literature Saved My Life* is the lists of books and recommendations contained therein. Some of these I had read before, but most of them I had

not. In order to locate more examples and models for the work I wanted to write, I followed up Shields's leads and investigated interesting-sounding books using Agent Cooper's "Tibetan method" from *Twin Peaks*: guided intuition. Two novels from the 70s that Shields recommended highly, both reissued by New York Review Books, proved influential: Renata Adler's *Speedboat* (1976) and Elizabeth Hardwick's *Sleepless Nights* (1979). The two books are stylistic first cousins, or twins; Shields says that *Speedboat* "captivates by its jagged and frenetic changes of pitch and tone and voice" (RH 115) and that in it, "[i]deas, experiences, and emotions are inseparable" (RH 116). What he says about *Speedboat* is also true of *Sleepless Nights*, and could just as easily apply to *Bluets*. I read both novels in a few weeks' time and took away from them a sense of breathless speed, the way in which their fragments and slashes of narrative, insinuations and diamonds of insight, hurtled me forward with the momentum of a suddenly starting and stopping subway car. (A more recently published novel written in a similar style, Jenny Offill's 2014 *Dept. of Speculation*, did not yield the same degree of aesthetic pleasure and shock, but did provide me with an essential quote from Thomas Edison.)

One particular list of books in *Reality Hunger*, and its evaluation of the quality in the books that made them valuable, I kept returning to: "What I love: the critical intelligence in the imaginative position — D.H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*; Wayne Kostenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*; Nicholson Baker, *U & I*; Geoff Dyer, *Out of Sheer Rage*; Terry Castle, "My Heroin Christmas"; Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*; Roland Barthes, *S/Z*; Nabokov, *Gogol*; Beckett, *Proust*; Proust, all; William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Sister Mary Ignatius, in other words, explaining it all to you — *les belles dames sans merci*: Joan Didion, all the essays; Pauline Kael, pretty much everything; Elizabeth Hardwick, *Sleepless Nights*" (146-147). From this list, I had initially only read the Lawrence, the James, and much of

the Didion and Kael; I later added the Dyer, the Carson, and the Hardwick. But the phrase at the beginning of the list was key for me: “the critical intelligence in the imaginative position.” That was the elusive combination, the goal I aspired to, the merging of faculties I wanted to exercise. It reconciled two sides of a dialectic I had struggled with for most of my life, the tension between my creative and critical impulses, and it pointed the way towards a possible synthesis and integration of the two desires. (To Shields’s list of works of imaginative criticism, I would add a few others that have proved important to me: William Carlos Williams’s *In the American Grain*, Kevin Young’s *The Gray Album: On the Blackness of Blackness*, Robert Duncan’s *The H.D. Book*, as well as the book *Tribute to Freud* by H.D. herself, and much of the critical work of Amiri Baraka and Nathaniel Mackey.)

I was also influenced by a number of other hybrid works that combined poetry and prose in innovative ways. My original conception for *Tear in the Throat* envisioned a volume that was a third poetry and two-thirds prose, or was even half-poetry, half-prose. Although this didn’t end up being the case, vestigial remnants of the impulse remain, and the works that triggered that impulse remain important to the final product. Chief among these are two early books by Michael Ondaatje, 1976’s *Coming Through Slaughter* and (to a lesser extent) 1970’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Although they are ostensibly “prose” novels that reimagine the lives and consciousnesses of famous historical figures (New Orleans jazz pioneer Buddy Bolden in *Coming Through Slaughter* and Billy the Kid in *Billy the Kid*), both borrow heavily from poetic techniques and approaches, and both feature entire sections and chapters that read like poems, especially in *The Collected Works*. Visually, I liked the way Ondaatje arranged his sections and chapter breaks in *Coming Through Slaughter*, and I kept the chapter lengths and prose style of *Slaughter* (short, sparse, hinting) in mind as models while writing *Tear*. I also

was intrigued by the way both works incorporated documentary miscellany, whether real or invented (photographs, illustrations, lists of the names of New Orleans brass bands, excerpts from the history of mental hospitals, standard chronologies, interviews, etc.), into their framework; the resulting various and interrupted texture was another key formal influence.

Although less directly impactful than Ondaatje on the project per se, the works of Anne Carson and Claudia Rankine were also important formal and stylistic models. Carson's hybrid constructions in works like *Glass, Irony and God* (1992), *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry* (1995), and *Men in the Off Hours* (2001), and her willingness to participate in (and invent) any genre she chose — shooting scripts for fantastical TV shows, poems that are essays, essays that are poems, imaginary interviews, epigrammatic talks, to name a few — served as weird aunts in *Tear's* rear window and long genealogy. Similarly, Claudia Rankine's two most recent and groundbreaking "American lyrics," 2004's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and 2014's *Citizen*, helped expand my sense of what the lyric might do and what it might be for. Rankine's books crossed and blurred genres just as boldly as Carson's did, only with more of a sense of political engagement and emotional immediacy, and they added an important visual element, as well. I tried also to keep in mind the exhortation Rankine made in her 2014 interview with the *Los Angeles Times*: "to pull the lyric back into its realities." The facts in rhyme or conflict with the dream, the celestial vision as well as the blood in the singer's rumpled Kleenex — I wanted to include them both in the framework of the book, not necessarily have to come down on the side of one or the other. Perhaps I could even find room to conceive of them as complementary hemispheres, not forever warring antagonists. *Both-and* and *I-thou*, not *either-or* or *I-it*. I wanted to fight my appetite for closure and neatness.

I was aware of some of my own less attractive innate tendencies (mystification, grandiosity, mythologizing, too much genuflection at the feet of the “genius”) before and during the writing of the dissertation, and I wanted to interrogate them. I became more self-conscious about this the deeper I got into *Tear*, and a series of “questions to answer” appeared in my notebook when I was roughly halfway through the first draft:

- How is this not just my taste, what I like?
- What is “soul”? The “tear”? The duende? Exactly? Is it strictly interior? Does it need an audience?
- How would Sebald write about Ray Charles? [MODEL]
- Question my impulses.
- A metaphysical/poetic inquiry rather than a theoretical one?

A few pages later, I wrote two further instructions to myself: “Do your research” and “Go against your own grain.” I tried to keep my own counsel in completing the back end of the book, continue challenging my own certainties. I also kept in mind a quote by Miles Davis I found in an interview with Dr. Pavlic about his book on Donny Hathaway: “Play above what you know, and finish before you’re done.” I worry still that I wrapped the book up too neatly, but hopefully, I finished before I was done; I know for sure that, throughout, I played above what I know.

So much for the form, then; what about the content? I was talking with some friends at a party, and some song or musician came up. I went off on one of my spiels about whatever or whoever it was, a spiel composed of equal parts enthusiasm and unwilling, encyclopedic recall of odd facts, related anecdotes, and scraps of folklore. I carry around with me at all times a vast and deep array of such (often useless) knowledge, and at times, prompted or not, it rushes forth.

I try to keep it in check, follow the social cues, mostly successfully, but this time, the river flowed. It must have been more interesting than usual, because one of the assembled listeners told me, “You’re a writer. You should write about stuff like this, write about music. Why don’t you write all this stuff down?” I already had the idea for the book’s form indistinctly in mind at this point, and my friend’s practical recommendation about potential content reacted with the formal idea, triggered some sort of alchemical transformation. I thought about what one of my favorite writing teachers, current U.S. poet laureate Charles Wright, told me in a workshop when I was twenty-two, in response to a bad poem I had written about a 60s garage band: “We all want to write about music, but it just can’t be done.” I realized I had wanted to prove Charles wrong about this in some way for many years, even though he was probably right. The impossible task of writing about music was mine.

Early attempts were stiff and abstract, too hazy and smoky. I tried to isolate and name the hidden qualities of sound; I wrote little vignettes, dim prose poems about the mysterious homemade musical instrument Washington Phillips played, the mythical folk album Kurt Cobain would have made if he hadn’t killed himself, the time I shook hands with Bob Dylan in Chattanooga, Tennessee. I felt stuck. On my front porch, I complained to another friend (not the one who recommended I write about music) that the task I had set up for myself just could not be successfully completed. He asked me specifically what it was about music that I wanted to explain or capture, what aspect of it was actually worth writing about. I didn’t know what to say; I couldn’t articulate it. We went inside, and I started playing him songs. I played a deep mid-60s studio cut from Elvis, I played a track by the Showmen, I played “You Can Have Her” by Roy Hamilton, I played a Little Richard 45, I played a Hound Dog Taylor live album. “That!” I

said, incoherently. “I want to write about that!” My friend said, “I think you mean something that has to do with the voice.”

Such focus was greatly needed. I went to the library the next day, checked out a stack of books about the voice, and started reading and thinking. I remembered a Roland Barthes essay, “The Grain of the Voice,” that I had read years before, and I tracked that down again too. I spoke aloud what the actual subject matter of my dissertation would be to other living humans, and it became more real—and in response to my announcement, a poet friend helpfully told me about Mladen Dolar’s book about the voice, which provided *Tear* with some necessary philosophical underpinning. I jotted down potential categories of voice-related inquiry in a notebook: “disembodied voice of poetic oracle,” “hearing voices,” “electronic voice phenomenon,” “voices in the air,” “ventriloquism (*Magic, Dead of Night*).” I wrote down what I thought I knew about the voice, and then checked it against the facts; I argued with my own ideas, quarreled with them, logically and illogically. I crossed out propositions and came up with new ones. I made lists of singers and songs I wanted to write about. (Most of the songs I’d originally played my friend on the night of the eureka moment found its way onto these lists, and into the dissertation, in one way or another.) After a few weeks of writing, a surprising protagonist for the book emerged: George Ivan Morrison, grumpy Irish R&B singer, born in Belfast 8/31/45, Van the Man, the Belfast Cowboy.

Morrison’s voice was essentially unfathomable to me. I could not reconcile the man and his body, his experience and his personality, with what I heard coming out of his throat and how that sound affected me. I started listening to him again, dug up old bootlegs, ordered obscure records, went back to two of the only writers who ever said much of use about Morrison: Greil Marcus and Lester Bangs. Both writers had been personal touchstones for me for a long time.

When I first started really getting into music and literature, at around age nineteen or twenty, I searched out the canonical books on rock'n'roll and encountered the same two names again and again: Marcus and Bangs, sort of the Dickinson and Whitman, or perhaps the Melville and Hawthorne, of mid-twentieth-century American popular music journalism, with Marcus as the *éminence grise* and Bangs as the Eminence Grease. Marcus was always the more intellectual of the two, with pretensions to respectability, and at times he can be faulted for taking the music almost too seriously, weaving in comparisons to French Situationism and obscure nineteenth-century Puritan religious philosophy that the Sly and the Family Stone live B-side in question might not necessarily warrant. Nevertheless: he took the music *seriously*, and for every instance in which when he overstepped, there were six or seven others when he was able to “discern an art movement, or an entire country, lurking inside a song” (*The New Yorker*, 2004, a blurb quoted on the back jacket of my paperback copy of the most recent reissue of Marcus’s classic *Mystery Train*). A later book of Marcus’s that nobody except me seems to like is his scattershot, tossed-off-feeling homage to Morrison, 2010’s *When That Rough God Goes Riding: Listening to Van Morrison*. Marcus calls the form of the book that of a “story made of fragments” (7); it documents Morrison’s lifelong quest for the elusive “moment when the magic word, riff, note, or chord is found and everything is transformed” (7), and it necessarily takes the form of an assemblage of fragments itself: short, non-chronological examinations of songs and performances when Morrison finds (and sometimes loses) that moment. Besides the chapters in Ondaatje’s *Coming Through Slaughter*, the other models for the size and shape of the sections of *Tear in the Throat* were the mini-essays on Morrison in Marcus’s book. I tried hard not to duplicate too closely any of the subject matter in *When That Rough God Goes Riding* in my dissertation, but in the case of “Listen to the Lion,” it was unavoidable, and I had no choice but

to quote Marcus's precise, illuminating description of the key moment in that song (and, in my estimation, the key moment in Morrison's entire career).

Even more so than Marcus, however, Lester Bangs is the chief tutelary spirit hanging around the edges of *Tear in the Throat* (along with Lorca's ghost). In 1979, Bangs published an astonishing essay about Van Morrison's most acclaimed album, 1968's *Astral Weeks*, in a collection edited by Marcus called *Stranded*, for which Marcus asked a selection of writers to contribute pieces about their favorite albums of all time, the proverbial "desert island discs" that, given the opportunity, they would spend the rest of eternity listening to. In his introduction to *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung*, the 1987 collection of Bangs's writings that he edited after Bangs's premature 1982 death at the age of thirty-three, Marcus says, "Perhaps what this book demands from a reader is a willingness to accept that the best writer in America could write almost nothing but record reviews" (x). Bangs's *Astral Weeks* essay is the finest example of the type of polished, considered, complex, and completed piece (not written for deadline) that he could have written more of if he'd lived longer; its thoughtfulness, intimacy, and confessional soulfulness belie his gonzo reputation. It is one of my favorite pieces of writing by anyone, and I resisted rereading it until after I was deep into the dissertation, afraid that I might be too cowed and dissuaded by it to write about Morrison (and music!) myself. It still holds up, and it stands as *Tear in the Throat*'s central influence, on levels both surface and subterranean. It pointed me to Morrison's work, and it ended up pointing me to my own. I'll end the introduction with this passage from Bangs, which I know so well it resides deep in my brain and my blood, and which has served me as a steady guide for more years than I could have imagined: "But in the condition I was in, [*Astral Weeks*] assumed at the time the quality of a beacon, a light on the far shores of the murk; what's more, it was proof that there was something left to express artistically

besides nihilism and destruction... It sounded like the man who made *Astral Weeks* was in terrible pain, pain most of Van Morrison's previous works had only suggested; but... there was a redemptive element in the blackness, ultimate compassion for the suffering of others, and a swath of pure beauty and mystical awe that cut right through the heart of the work" (20).

## CHAPTER 2

### AUDIBLE AIR

We can “do” voices, and the voice  
changes in time and memory,  
but is there is an essential currency in a voice,  
a timbre or sonority as much at the core of a person  
as a defining scar?

Voices fall silent; they linger in the skulls of our memory.

The ears are magical conductors.

I may babble, I may moan, articulate only vowels and gravel from my throat's gutter.

I may keen and whistle, hiss and whine, yip and yap, twitter and peep,

hiccough and whimper, sputter and snort, emanate chest-deep waves of blue

and purple from the bottom of my windpipe.

The voice is a free stream of energy that may soar or plummet from its prescribed orbit at any moment, always only one step removed from the buzz of the insects and the low purr of the wolves. Perhaps two or three from glossolalia, speaking in tongues, the celestial language of John Dee's angels.

In humans, the larynx — the voice box — is situated lower in the throat than in other mammals, allowing us both to speak, and choke, more easily.

The main function of the larynx isn't to provide sound; it's to keep anything but air from entering the lungs. It also helps stabilize the body when performing strenuous activity (lifting, pushing, pulling).

The muscles in the larynx have more nerve endings than any other muscles in the human body except the muscles around the eyes. (This includes the hands and the rest of the face.)

\*

Inhaled air goes through the pharynx (throat), down the trachea (windpipe), and into the lungs. The air is then exhaled from the lungs by the pressure of the diaphragm. It rises back up the windpipe where it meets the vocal folds on the larynx, causing them to vibrate. (These vocal folds, or cords, can resonate thousands of times per second.) The quicker the vibration, the higher-pitched the voice. In deeper voices, the vocal cords vibrate much more slowly.

The sound of the voice emanating directly from the larynx would be reedy and thin. To achieve volume and body, it must resonate.

Singing, more than speaking, causes the bones of the skull, spine, and ribcage, as well as the cartilage in the sternum, to vibrate along with the vocal cords.

Almost the entire body is involved in the production of the human voice, not just the larynx, pharynx, trachea, glottis, lips, and mouth.

\*

The voice is audible air.

From a William Gass essay: “The neck, Plato tells us in the *Timaeus*, was fashioned by the Demiurge as a kind of isthmus between the head, which houses the higher soul, and the damper, softer regions given to the appetites and passions” (“The Evil Demiurge,” 253).

Is it any coincidence the throat and the vocal cords are found in the neck?

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Peter Mills writes that on the 1974 album *Veedon Fleece*, Van Morrison achieved a near-perfect balance between his lifelong concerns with both the bodily and the non-material through his singing: “[His] voice is poised between these two modes: the physical response to the metaphysical dimension, a wise, weightless and inscrutable extrusion from the gut, chest and head — the bridge and meeting point of the body and soul, made real through Morrison’s voice” (157).

Reconciliation between these two poles, the magnetic north and south I am strung between, is the synthesis I dream of striking, the balance my life bends to attain, shies away from in fear.

“When I was very young, I saw a film version of the life of John McCormack, the Irish tenor, playing himself. In it he explained to his accompanist that the element necessary to mark the important voice off from the other good ones was very specific. ‘You have to have,’ he said, ‘the yarragh in your voice.’” - Ralph J. Gleason, “Rhythm: A Young Irishman Haunted by Dreams,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 1, 1970.

“Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.” – Whitman, “Song of Myself”  
(1855)

In his 2012 short story “A History of the Human Voice,” Brian Evenson writes that in the not-so-distant past, “there existed a symbiosis between the human voice and the insect known as the bee” (24). Elite groups were said to have enhanced their speech by inserting enraged bees directly into their vocal cords by means of a cherrywood wand and a series of “insertion channels” torn into the throat itself.

An early recording of this hybridized voice is described as a “haunting, plaintive melody, simultaneously uni- and multivocal.” The narrator, having listened to this recording, now hears the unaugmented human voice as forever deficient, somehow lacking.

The story ends with his attempts to recapture this lost majesty by stuffing bees down his own engorged throat.

In the 1998 song “We Are Real,” David Berman of the Silver Jews sang, “All my favorite singers couldn’t sing.”

Certain voices put certain people’s nerves on edge, affect their nervous system viscerally. Make their spines prickle and guts twist.

I associated rough, grainy, damaged voices with authority and authenticity, with experience and hard living. I preferred Howlin’ Wolf and Kurt Cobain, Bob Dylan and Hound Dog Taylor, PJ Harvey and Courtney Love, Dave Van Ronk and late Billie Holiday with the shadows and stains in her voice.

(And yet I also thrilled, later, to the purity of voices like Roy Hamilton’s and Lorraine Ellison’s, the mysteries of four-part doo-wop harmonies.)

The way that time, and pain, and smoke and liquor, registered in the lungs and throat, warped the vocal cords and forced the air and sound out differently, more harshly and unbeautifully. I attributed whole kingdoms of experience and lived possibility to these voices whose effects on me registered so automatically and physically, and yet at times I wondered if all these feelings stimulated, exploded in me, were simply caused by some sort of physical trick? Did these singers know and feel as much as I believed, as I felt, they did?

Maybe they just smoked too much.

(The master says gnomically to the pupil in the occult autobiography *The Zelator*: “When the outer note corresponds to the inner note, then there are always tears. That is the law” (103).)

Their voices could quite literally destroy me, devour me from the outside in. I was ravished by their voices. Their voices were ravaged (by life) in turn. (The connection between “ravage” and “ravish.”)

Just as I suspected that music did not simply give me access to emotions I didn't know I could feel, but actually gave me access to — created — emotions I would not otherwise have felt at all, I wondered if the fact, the presence, of their singing voices did not (in fact) make life more difficult for those who possessed them. Did they have to live up to the promise and horror in their voices, or did their life and experience *make* those voices? Were their voices ultimately a blessing or a curse?

And yet the voice metamorphoses across time.

The gift is the thing that sets you apart. You are exiled from your original family or tribe and offered membership into a new one whose guidelines and durations are unclear.

The voice could vanish, or you could destroy it with alcohol, cigarettes, and overuse. (Listen to Harry Nilsson obliterate the priceless instrument in his throat, with one of the greatest ranges of any pop singer of the 1960s, as he sings Jimmy Cliff's "Many Rivers to Cross" on the 1974 *Pussy Cats* album, his producer and drinking buddy John Lennon egging him on.) Altitude or cancer or old age could ravage it.

You could fail to live up to the promise of the gift.

Destroying the voice is more intimate than smashing the guitar, lighting fire to the piano, snapping the flute across your knee. It is yourself, your own body, which you destroy.

The rings of the vocal cords like rings on an uprooted tree.

- 1.) The voice is the most intimate and physical instrument of all.
- 2.) It has no intermediary, no scrim or filter through which to pass besides pharynx, larynx, glottis, lips, teeth, mouth, and air.
- 3.) Is it hard to hide behind one's voice?
- 4.) The singer is almost always front and center.
- 5.) Piano, drums, saxophone, panpipes, bass, and organ can reveal much about a performer, but the voice reveals more.
- 6.) Does the voice reveal more?



Jack Endino, Nirvana's first producer, said this about the group: "I didn't know whether to laugh or cry at the band, but the vocals could raise your hair up" (Sandford 75).

On Tuesday, March 1, 1994, Cobain lost his voice onstage while performing in Munich and consulted a German throat specialist the following day. He was diagnosed with severe laryngitis and bronchitis. The rest of the European tour was cancelled. Cobain's own doctor advised him to "take at least two months off and learn to sing properly" (Sandford 313). Cobain shot himself in the mouth in the garage of his house in Seattle four weeks later.

Cobain suffered throughout his life from an undiagnosed stomach ailment, for which he self-medicated himself with heroin and other opiates. His suicide note ended, "Thank you all from the pit of my burning, nauseous stomach" (Sandford 333). In an interview given in fall 1993, Cobain said that the spot in his abdomen around which his stomach pain was centered was the same place he sang from, from which his voice originated.

The Beatles recorded their debut album *Please Please Me* in a single day, February 11, 1963, at EMI Studios in London. They had been touring relentlessly, and to make matters worse, John Lennon had a nasty cold. The last song the band attempted was “Twist and Shout.” Lennon and everyone else in the studio knew that this was their one chance to record the song before his voice was destroyed entirely.

He sang the song stripped to the waist after gargling on milk and sucking on a lozenge. Later he said, “That song nearly killed me. My voice wasn’t the same for a long time after; every time I swallowed, it was like sandpaper” (*Beatles Anthology* 93).

Lennon notoriously disliked his singing voice and would often tell George Martin and other Beatles recording engineers to mask it and cover it up — “smother it in tomato ketchup” (Thompson 12).

When recording “Tomorrow Never Knows” in April 1966, Lennon told Martin that he wanted his vocals to sound like a hundred chanting Tibetan monks on top of a mountain. His first idea about how to do this was to hang himself upside down by a rope in the recording studio and then sing into the microphone while being slowly spun around in a circle.

I saw the Zombies play the other night at the Georgia Theatre in Athens. Only two of the original members were still around — Rod Argent, keyboard wizard and writer of the majority of their early hits, and Colin Blundstone, lead singer. Born only ten days apart, Blundstone and Argent were both 68 years old. They looked their age in many respects but were mysteriously ageless and youthful in others.

Blundstone's hair was dyed a deep black, and at times the harsher spotlights revealed a face that seemed tired or at least stoic. He wore a mod, Chinese-looking black jacket over a black shirt with black pants, and he held his hands at his side throughout almost the entire performance in a gingerly, endearing, almost mincing way, whether he was singing or (slowly) dancing or just standing around between songs.

His voice was a preserved thing of wonder and beauty, however — still breathy and whispery, a vulnerable dream of fallen leaves and brief candles. Age had nipped away at the tips and edges of the rest of his body, but his voice was miraculously unchanged.

Did he not smoke? Did he gargle with salt water, drink tea with honey each night for forty years? Chris White, the only founding member of the Zombies not in evidence on their 2014 touring troupe, said that Blundstone's voice had an inherently "melancholic tinge" to it, so the band wrote songs in a novel mixture of minor and major, jazz-inflected chords to suit it. Blundstone says that as a child, he liked to "walk along the road and sing at the top of my voice." He was also very athletic and liked to run a lot: "I suppose I had well developed lungs or something like that!" (*Zombie Heaven* liner notes)

An early review of the Zombies' first single for Decca Records, 1964's "She's Not There," includes this sentence: "A mild case of manic-depression, with bouts of vocal frenzy punctuated by epiglottal grunts from bass guitar" (*ZH* notes).

Speaking and singing raise blood pressure, raise the heart rate, cause irregular heartbeats.

Opera singers sing so loudly (over 110 decibels) that they can cause damage to their own ears, which in turn can cause them to start to lose their voices.

Evolutionary biologists have proposed that the way in which the larynx descends in a human child mirrors the way the larynx evolved in early hominids. A newborn baby's larynx is similar to that of an *Australopithecus*. Neanderthals are believed to have had the vocal capabilities of a two-year-old modern human.

Truly modern speech is probably less than 100,000 years old.

The voice is the instrument every human is born with.

Descriptions of the effects of a certain type of voice — raising your hackles or the hair on the back of your neck, or sending a cold shiver or chill down the spine — recall the definitions of poetry given by several different poets over the course of the last two centuries.

Emily Dickinson said in an 1870 remark to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, “If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry. These are the only way I know it. Is there any other way?” (Leyda 151)

(Paul McCartney said that to sing like Little Richard, you had to sing through the top of your head.)

A.E. Housman wrote in his 1933 lecture “The Name and Nature of Poetry,” “Experience has taught me, when I am shaving of a morning, to keep watch over my thoughts, because, if a line of poetry strays into my memory, my skin bristles so that the razor ceases to act. This particular symptom is accompanied by a shiver down the spine; there is another which consists of a constriction of the throat and a precipitation of water to the eyes” (193).

Robert Graves mentions this notion again near the beginning of his 1948 book *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*; he calls it “Housman’s practical test.” He elaborates via his myth of the triple goddess, “The reason why the hairs stand on end, the eyes water, the throat is constricted, the skin crawls and a shiver runs down the spine when one writes or reads a true poem is that a true poem is necessarily an invocation of the White Goddess, or Muse, the Mother of All Living, the ancient power of fright and lust — the female spider or the queen-bee whose embrace is death. Housman offered a secondary test of true poetry: whether it matches a phrases of Keats’s, ‘everything that reminds me of her goes through me like a spear’”

(24). (Housman elaborates on this in his lecture: “The seat of this sensation is the pit of the stomach”(193.))

Somewhat less dramatically, Allen Ginsberg says this in the 2005 Bob Dylan documentary *No Direction Home*: “Poetry is words that are empowered that make your hair stand on end... that you recognize instantly as being some form of subjective truth that has an objective reality to it because somebody’s realized it. Then you call it poetry later.”

And yet these poets are all ostensibly talking about words, abstract words that are written and then read. The voices (with the yarragh, the grain, the timbre, the *duende*) have the same physical, visceral, nervous effects upon the listener as poetry does, and yet the voice is seemingly secondary to, or extraneous to, language itself. Does the voice achieve this effect most when it eludes, or elides, or transcends language? When it keens and howls and moans. Elongates and sculpts sound into shapes like the spine and nerves.

Do we privilege language too much? Does the voice matter more, or just as much?

In the episode of *Mad Men* in season six where everyone in the office is high on an injected cocktail of amphetamines and B-vitamins to push them through a weekend deadline, a sweaty and hallucinating Don Draper barges into a meeting of his copywriters and, apropos of nothing, tells them this: “Just get me in the room. The timbre of my voice is as important as the words that I say.”

## DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE VOICE AND THE WORD

VOICE: Admit it. You need me.

WORD: I need no such thing. You are only my vessel, the vehicle for my arrival.

VOICE: But I am there — I was there — before all that.

WORD: Air waits for wind. Wind is where the action is.

VOICE: THE AIR HAS ITS OWN INTEREST.

In his 2006 book *A Voice and Nothing More*, the Slovenian philosopher Mladen Dolar says that one of the strangest properties of the voice is how it can exceed language and meaning to create an effect “without a proper cause... surpassing its explicable cause” (8).

Roland Barthes writes in his 1972 essay “The Grain of the Voice” “This phonetics — am I alone in perceiving it? am I hearing voices within the voice? but isn’t it the truth of the voice to be hallucinated? isn’t the entire space of the voice an infinite one?” (184)

Babies begin to hear before they start to see — hearing is the first sense we develop in the womb. The mother’s heartbeat is the only sound familiar to the infant other than the sound of her filtered voice. Hearing is the last sense to deactivate when we drift off to sleep, and the first one to switch on again when we wake. Supposedly hearing is the last sense we lose when we die.

The voice drops heavy from the summer above the clouds, hits a patch of turbulence,  
experiences a rupture in its vibrational pattern, floats like a sheet of notebook paper

through the radiation of the ultraviolet spectrum, descends like an invisible dove from the shaft  
of light that emanates from the open hatch of the break in the clouds

Its mouth is open, then closed. It is wave and particle, movement and singularity.

It whistles, stagnates in the swamp of the lower abdomen, sails at unimaginable speeds

through the high vector of the mercury, awaits annunciation, is nervous about its prospects for  
finding a host. There is a knot in its neck, an animal in its throat it can't get rid of.

## CHAPTER 3

### SCAT-OLOGY

The first time I saw Van Morrison was at the 2007 Jazz and Heritage Festival in New Orleans. Still visible on the fronts of many of the houses around the Fairgrounds where the festival was held was the brutal graffiti (numbers, X's, markings like tic-tac-toe) left by rescuers checking the houses for the living and the dead after Katrina. In April it was already so hot it verged at moments on the unbearable. It was the weekend I learned that what I thought were small horses leading tourists on carriage tours through the French Quarter were in fact mules — horses couldn't survive the New Orleans humidity, at least according to my friend.

Morrison was horrible — turgid, sedate, and indifferent. We listened to him from what seemed like a quarter of a mile away, unable to penetrate further into the sea of lawn chairs, beach umbrellas, and sunburned frat boys eating crawfish Monica and yelling for “Brown-Eyed Girl!” There were a lot of jazz and blues covers, a lot of mid-tempo numbers. Dr. John may or may not have made a guest appearance on piano. Nothing caught fire. He seemed sleepy; his voice never really got out of his chest. I was incredibly disappointed.

From a conversation between the psychologist R.D. Laing and Van Morrison in 1973:

LAING: All the times that I've listened to your voice, you seem to sing somewhere between your throat and your heart. Sometimes it's right in your heart, sometimes it's more up in your throat. When you do that now, is that the zone that you want to both come from and resonate in other people, the heart...

MORRISON: Eventually it'll get into the heart. That's what the eventual goal is — Exactly.

(Mills 141)

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“The approach now is to sing from lower down [the diaphragm] so I do not ruin my voice. Before, I sang in the upper area of my throat, which tends to wreck the vocal cords over time. Singing from lower in the belly allows my resonance to carry far. I can stand four feet from a mike and be heard quite resonantly.” – Van Morrison, interview with *Performing Songwriter*,

March/April 2009

(Mills, 147)

The singer feels that she gives away some essential part of herself when she sings. This thing, this essence or breath or spirit, escapes through her mouth and can't necessarily be recaptured in the exact same way again until she's drawn something back into herself and cultivated it with her breath and cells. The listener leaves feeling refreshed and rejuvenated.

It is difficult to talk about the voice in language. I want to affix the voice, apprehend it, precisely and exactly, but it keeps slipping away from my grasp. Perhaps this is because, for all its umbilical link to language, the voice has a life outside it—above and below—as well.

In trying to describe voices, I am stymied by adjectives, imprecise similes and metaphors. I get close, but the essence (if there is such a thing) escapes. I attempt a fission but am unsure if the elements can separate. Something both extra and essential is left to wriggle away from my mouth and face.

In “The Grain of the Voice,” Barthes says that all of music criticism is hampered by this problem: music, or a description of its performance, is “only ever translated into the poorest of linguistic categories: the adjective” (179). (I am reminded of Elvis Costello’s bitter epigram that “writing about music is like dancing about architecture.”) Describing music with adjectives makes music safer and more reassuring, Barthes claims—tames and corrals its harsher, more dangerous edges. To counter this, he offers instead the idea of “the grain of the voice”—a focus on the physical erotics of music, “the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs” (188). He argues for a new aesthetics of musical pleasure, one that sidesteps and ignores existing intellectual conventions of style and interpretation.

But even that only helps me a little bit. Even though it is a concept of the corporeal, for me Barthes’s grain still floats free in the zone of concepts like Lorca’s *duende* and Keats’s “negative capability”—ambiguous, quicksilver, subatomic, impossible to ever fully pin down or light upon. Once spotted, they change color and take flight again. In a 1978 interview, Bob Dylan said “the closest I ever got to the sound I hear in my mind was on individual bands in the [1966] album *Blonde on Blonde*. It’s that thin, that wild mercury sound. It’s metallic and bright gold, with whatever that conjures up” (*The Essential Interviews* 209). And yet for all their wild

mercury nature, these concepts, this zone, register somehow viscerally, even if only for an instant, make themselves distinctly *known* and *felt* before they slip away from attention that is too glaring and direct.

Mladen Dolar says that in addition to its two standard functions (a vehicle through which to convey meaning, and an aesthetic object to be admired on its own), the voice is also a thing “which does not go up in smoke in the conveyance of meaning, and does not solidify in an object of fetish reverence, but... which functions as a blind spot... a disturbance of aesthetic appreciation” (4). The voice is slippery; it exceeds the words we want it to convey. It has a life of its own outside the script.

These days, oddly, it's Morrison's voice that I am most concerned with, that beguiles, confuses, and draws me to it the most.

Other voices have stayed with me longer, affected me more significantly at other periods of my life. I imitated Michael Jackson's *Thriller*-era falsetto as a four-year-old, remember delightedly echoing the yips and *Oooo*'s that were squarely in the middle of my vocal range. Cobain's yowl was the violet light in a black hole that piloted me through adolescence. (He was such a good screamer.) Marvin Gaye's voice taught me as much about pain and joy as anything else in my life, and I enjoy listening to him sing more than anyone else, probably.

Dylan's voice is probably the one I've spent the most time with, know the most intimately, the one that has for me the most edges and permutations, the one I would defend and champion the most fervently against the anodyne ears of unadventurous listeners. I treasure Dylan's voice even at its most abrasive, raspy, fucked-up, obtuse, perverse, unfathomable, and yet even I would have to admit that his voice, and voices, are more a series of masks than any single iteration of a "true self." Sometimes even his interviews sound like they were given by different people.

I would repeatedly go see whatever shambling disaster of a show Chan Marshall of Cat Power would put on in Athens or Atlanta in the late 90s (singing from a ball on the floor in the back of the club, fleeing the stage fifteen minutes after she showed up late for her own performance, almost never finishing a song completely) in hopes of being present for one of the rare moments when she overcame her stage fright and her voice sliced through the drunken undertow of two hundred lives like a beam of light spurting from a buried well. When she could hold it together and ride the song out, or steer it to an inlet where she was comfortable, the purity of her voice — and the way that purity was undercut by a tear, a drawl, a slur, a dipping into

oblivion that was the other ineradicable quality of her voice — was devastating. It could cut right through me to the blue zone of viscera and emotion I was trying so hard to protect or deny.

For about a month or so in 2003 or 2004, when I needed to be comforted, I could only listen to the voice of Mississippi John Hurt (the American vocal Buddha). Similarly, a few years ago, for about three weeks I could only listen to Karen Dalton's 1971 album *In My Own Time*, fascinated by the looseness of the control she wielded over her battered, wavering instrument, by the way her vocals barely held the songs together, floated away from them in their own parenthetical directions. In the liner notes to the 2006 reissue of the album, Nick Cave recounts driving around Brazil listening to the first song on the album on a cassette tape again and again: "But the one that really stayed with me and I must have played a million times is 'Something On Your Mind.' It's just the most extraordinary vocal I've ever heard, I think. And I've heard Billie Holiday, and I guess that there's comparisons, but there is something else going on as well in this voice. I was going to say too it's a fragile voice, but of course it's not a fragile voice, because it's been smashed into a million pieces... There's something that's inherent in her voice, an understanding of this kind of sorrow. She knows how to be sad."

I've been listening to Charley Patton a lot lately trying to figure out if his voice is really real.

Morrison's voice interests me because it often seems inexplicable, misaligned from his body and even his experience. The Muse looks away from her work with the shears for a second, and the wrong thread with the wrong sound wave woven into it gets dropped into the wrong body, or something like that. The gift seems to have been given to the recipient the most constitutionally unsuited for it. The biographies of Morrison are rough going if you're a fan: almost no one has anything nice to say about him. Recurrent adjectives used to describe him

include *distant, uncommunicative, arrogant, sullen, angry, grumpy, drunken, unpredictable, cutting, brusque, dismissive, moody, bitter*.

In the voice pain and comfort, a squealing anger. Resentment, and a squall, a snuffle. The meandering arrow of a fitful quest for transcendence. Or perhaps something more like a ley line — an invisible force of magnetism that compels you regardless of whether or not you're aware of the secret nature of its influence. A Protestant Northern Irish mysticism, rough-and-tumble and pragmatic. B.B. King said of Morrison: "His voice is pure, yet bitter" (Mills 145). The original lineup of Them sweltering at the Maritime in Belfast.

*Webster's Third New International Dictionary* lists these definitions and variants for **scat**:

a crown tax in the Shetland and Orkney islands for the use of common lands;

a sudden shower of rain;

SMASH, BANG, SMACK;

SCATTER;

SMASH, BEAT;

to leave hurriedly, move with more than ordinary speed;

an animal fecal dropping.

And also:

“singing with meaningless syllables instead of words esp. in jazz for an instrumental effect — compare BOP, RIFF” (*noun, perhaps imitative*)

and

“to improvise or repeat meaningless syllables to a melody : sing scat”

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**Scatology** is defined as *the study of excrement*  
                                   or *obscene literature*  
                                   or *interest in things filthy or obscene (as in literature)*

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Other significant variations of the root syllable include **scatter** and **scattered**, as well as **scathe** and **scathing**. The associations with the phoneme seem to be waste, diffusion, and excretion.

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To be **scaturient** is to be “gushing forth: OVERFLOWING, EFFUSIVE.”

On the night of February 15, 1973, Van Morrison played two sets at the club The Lion's Share in San Anselmo, California, with jazz piano legend Vince Guaraldi of *Peanuts* fame sitting in.

The show was broadcast on KSAN, a low-power station out of Berkeley, but a winter snowstorm in the area on the night of the broadcast wreaked widespread havoc on the radio signal. (The Morrison song "Snow in San Anselmo" from the same year may or may not commemorate this evening for posterity.) Because of these reception problems, the concert was broadcast in mono instead of stereo, and incomplete, fragmentary tapes circulated among collectors for years as bootlegs before the entire running time of the concert was eventually pieced together.

The strange weather, Guaraldi's presence, and Morrison's comfort in the surroundings of the club (he was living nearby at the time) seem to have generated a particularly inspired vocal performance on his part. The third song is credited as "Into the Mystic" on the bootleg CD I own, but at no point are any of that song's lyrics actually sung. In parentheses after the title reads (*scat version*). For the first three minutes of the performance Morrison improvises sounds, loosely following the song's original melody, I suppose, but inventing and digressing among several other new ones along the way.

At first the sounds he makes are relatively conventional, like when you hum along to a song you've forgotten the words to, in keeping with the type of improvising (doo-wop syllables, fills, da-da-da's) familiar from his recent hits like "Domino" and "Jackie Wilson Said (I'm In Heaven When You Smile)." Little more than a minute in, he bursts into an ecstatic trilling that is equal parts tongue and throat, all L's and B's, perhaps an R and W in there too. It seems to actually devolve for a few seconds into the sounds "Blah blah blah blah blah," which would

become part of the chorus to a song called “Behind the Ritual” he would write thirty-five years later. For about five seconds, the sounds used to denote empty, meaningless speech are freighted in Morrison’s mouth with an impossible-to-support density, weight, and import.

Some doo-doo-doo’s, some bop-bop’s. More Blah blah blah’s. A snatch of wordless humming, mouth closed. He starts asking what sounds like “Why” or “Y,” then “Why-ya?” “Why-yuh!” An emphatic, deeply declarative “Why-yuh!”, then a saxophone solo, then a guitar solo, each roughly as long as Morrison’s initial improvisations. Everybody trading solos like a trad jazz band.

Nine minutes in, Morrison reenters, humming from the middle of his throat. Out of nowhere, absurdly, he sings what could be “FIGARO” six times, then punctuates with a flurry of “skinny-bop’s” that lead him back again to a wordless rendering of what sounds like the actual melody of “Into the Mystic” again. The combo rises to a brief crescendo, and just after the ten-minute mark, the song concludes.

For years I imagined that in his 1979 essay on Van Morrison’s album *Astral Weeks*, which is still the best thing ever written about the singer, Lester Bangs wrote about seeing Morrison perform a completely wordless, ten-minute song with his Caledonian Soul Orchestra on a late-night TV show sometime in the early 70s. It was an astonishing performance that, in my memory of the piece, moved Bangs to tears and made him question the necessity of language.

My memory was wrong. In the essay, Bangs actually wrote about a 1974 TV performance of the then-unreleased song “Flamingoes Fly,” which did have lyrics, if only two lines of them. (“Way over yonder in the clear blue sky/Where flamingoes fly.”) What Bangs wrote applies nevertheless, and describes this mode of Morrison’s singing adroitly: “Just those

words, repeated slowly again and again, distended, permutated, turned into scat, suspended in space and then scattered to the winds, muttered like a mantra till they turn into nonsense syllables, then back into the same soaring image as time seems to stop entirely” (21).

The “Into the Mystic” performance at San Anselmo is the closest approximation to the imaginary non-verbal performance Bangs didn’t write about that I’ve ever found.

Later on in the evening, Morrison does a jubilant one-off cover of Fred Neil’s “Everybody’s Talkin’” that has the same skipping-stones-in-the-eternal-summer-garden feel of his early hits like “Brown-Eyed Girl” and “Warm Love.” The first two verses, and choruses, are sung straight, with escalating vocal fervor, and then after a short instrumental break, the scatting begins. It feels both extraneous and necessary; the syllables, explosions and implosions of vocal sound (fricatives, plosives, liquids) dance back and forth and are intertwined with the piano lines like inexplicable bubbles on a calm stream. They follow the melody, and exceed the melody, and then follow it again.

Does he feel his way into the comfort of the zone where the excess in the voice can make its way into the air? The next year he recorded a song called “Twilight Zone” in which he sings in a pleading falsetto about some sort of honeycomb, in which he unaccountably growls and snuffs.

The man who wrote “Everybody’s Talkin’,” Fred Neil, made a boatload of money off of Harry Nilsson’s cover of the song on the 1969 *Midnight Cowboy* soundtrack, retired to Florida, and spent most of the next thirty years of his life promoting the conservation of dolphins. He gave few interviews.

Dolphins have one of the most sophisticated patterns of and capacity for vocalization of any animal besides humans.

Purists insist that true scatting must be completely spontaneous and improvised and follow no set, predetermined pattern.

Louis Armstrong's 1926 recording of the song "Heebie Jeebies" is widely credited with popularizing the practice of scat singing. The story goes that a music stand holding the lyric sheet of the song was knocked over in the recording studio and Armstrong had to improvise a new set of lyrics (nonsense syllables) on the spot.

Gene Greene scatted occasionally on recordings as early as 1911 and 1917, however — "King of the Bungaloos" and "From Here to Shanghai." Greene's scatting is racist novelty in both instances, used to signify foreignness and barbarity.

Jelly Roll Morton claimed many things in his series of 1938 interviews with Alan Lomax, and one of them was popularizing and practicing scat singing in New Orleans long before the advent of Louis Armstrong. Morton said a comedian from Vicksburg, Mississippi, named Joe Sims invented scat, and that he and Tony Jackson adapted it and started using it to introduce songs around the turn of the twentieth century. When asked by Lomax what scat meant, Morton said it "doesn't mean anything but just something to give a song a flavor."

Great singers like Billie Holiday, Dinah Washington, and Bessie Smith never scatted at all. (At least not when they were being recorded.)

Scatting is sometimes referred to as gibberish. In the days of ragtime and early jazz, it was called a "jig chorus."

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I attribute Morrison's scatting to ecstasy, to transcendence, to a transportation of the spirit into an encounter with the sublime in produced sound, but on the other hand his scatting can be

deeply absurd. And yet watching him, listening to him, lose himself dislodges something deep-seated in me, between the heart and the diaphragm.

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On one end, scatting is farce, babble, gibberish, low comedy.

On the other, it soars away from language into what might be other, wordless realms of rapture and mystery.

Scatting can be considered as a frequency that operates only at the highest and lowest bands of several different spectra.

At the far ends of each, do the spectra touch?

Many quintessential New Orleans songs devolve — or evolve — into nonsense syllables at some point or another. Ooh Poo Pah Doo. Jockamo fee nané (which is bastardized French for either “court jester” or “kiss my ass,” depending on who you ask). The whistling in Professor Longhair’s “Mardi Gras in New Orleans.” Ah ha ha ha — Hey-O! Gooba gooba gooba gooba! Handa Wanda. Little Richard’s “Awopbopaloobop alopbamboom tutti frutti, a rooty!”, recorded at Cosimo Matassa’s J&M Studio on Rampart Street in 1955. Dr. John’s gumbo gris-gris, gumbo hoodoo, ya-ya. Tipitina tra la la la, oola malla walla dalla. Creole patois. What Ishmael Reed called “Mumbo-Jumbo.” Ay-La-Ay. Tico Tico. La Tee Tah.

Is the emotion beyond words, the unspeakable, unsingable, unsayable, truly visceral? Or is it an absurd secret code? Something else entirely, both at the same time?

“It means what it means.”

To scat is to be excessive, to proceed beyond the accepted confines and limitations — of the song and its lyrics, of language itself.

To scat is also to shit.

Scatting these days is mostly a joke. It signifies “jazz” or, more exactly, an ironic set of outdated tropes we call “jazziness.”

And yet scatting is also aligned in some way with speaking, or singing, in tongues. An excess of joy, or sorrow (the inchoate wailing and gnashing of the teeth of the traditional widow in mourning), carries the voice into other realms of sound, beyond which language is no longer appropriate, useful, or meaningful. Ululations, keening, surging, repetitious.

The second time I saw Van Morrison was less than a year later, at the South by Southwest festival in early March in Austin, Texas. A few nights before his headlining gig at the Austin Music Hall, Morrison played a set at a small club called La Zona Rosa. Both shows were ostensibly to promote his new album *Keep It Simple*, which was about to be released. I had a press pass and, after a long meandering wait in line, was able to get into the club. I knew no one else there — none of my friends were able to get in.

There was a sign at the bar saying that it would be closing five minutes before the set started, “By request of the performer,” and would remain closed for the duration of the performance. Coming from a musician who was notorious for enjoying a drink or two over the years, this move struck me as deeply perverse, and therefore admirable. I drank bourbon while I still could and checked out the assembled crowd of mostly English and American journalists. One English guy next to me was audibly dictating the first two paragraphs of his review of the show into a hand-held recorder a good half-hour before it actually began.

The eight- or nine-piece band, serious professionals, came onstage a few minutes before he did. He kind of lurched in front of the microphone from stage right suddenly and violently, even though I seem to remember some sort of typical showbiz introduction by a member of the band: “Ladies and gentlemen, would you please welcome the one, the only, Van the Man... VAN MORRISON!” From maybe fifteen feet away, and from a vantage point several feet below him, he still looked short. He was wearing sunglasses and a fedora, and he sang into a gold-plated microphone with his initials on the mike stand.

Few concessions were made to the crowd, or to his back catalogue of well-loved and popular songs. Almost every number was drawn from the as-yet-unreleased new album, with the exception of a cover of Webb Pierce’s classic country alcoholic lament, “There Stands the

Glass,” which was especially ironic to listen to with the bar standing in darkness behind us. One review I read said that Morrison told someone in the crowd to fuck off at one point, but I don’t remember it happening.

After maybe half an hour, something started to shift. Morrison began to attack the syllables of the songs, biting them off, snarling and growling them, repeating them in unpredictable flurries and bursts. He reminded me of a bulldog or a prizefighter with a broken face, an old heater warming up, pale cheeks flaking away from the sides of his sunglasses like fresh-baked biscuit.

The last song he played that night was the best song on the new album, but I didn’t know that at the time. It started with a gentle rhythm on the guitar and ukelele, and quietly he began singing about drinking wine and making time in the alley. It felt fluid and precise. Even the most blasé and exhausted-looking journalists glanced up from their electronic devices and began paying attention. He chanted “Behind the ritual/you find the spiritual” in a low growl again and again, until the words seemed to unmoor themselves from their network of associations and meanings and float free in the form of spontaneously generated syllables and sounds. His teeth drew back as he sang, and he seemed for a few moments to be transported into some sort of trance, an elongated pause of drawn-out time manifested in the form of evanescent vocalized phonemes that disappeared the instant they were produced. The lion was in full roar.

At first I wasn’t sure if he was singing what I thought he was singing, but after another moment it was clear that he was: “Blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah,” the syllable most associated with meaninglessness, nonsense, blather, sung with such inexplicable fervor and charged with such momentarily perverse passion that it was as if all previous

language had been boiled down to that single (plosive, sibilant) unit, where it could either end or begin again. In the beginning was the Blah, the yarragh.

He reached a point of fine frenzy, put the microphone back in its gold-plated stand, said “Let’s hear it for the BAND! Let’s hear it for the BAND!” and abruptly walked off stage. The band kept playing for another three or four minutes. Morrison did not reappear to play an encore or take a bow. It was unclear how much time had elapsed during the last song, what exactly had happened onstage.

As a child my preferred radio station was the oldies one (Atlanta's Fox 97.1 FM), which put me in the position of having many conversations with my parents as an eight- or nine-year-old about songs they half-remembered from when they were just a little bit older than I was.

I was drawn to doo-wop because I liked imitating the sublime nonsense of its refrains and backup choruses, and once I remember asking my mother, "Why does no one sing like this anymore?" It didn't make sense to me why anything so enviably perfect in conception and absurdity might have come to an end.

She explained something to me about styles changing and the requirements of the music business, and then she said, "I don't know why, really. I wish they still did."

The complex vocabulary of doo-wop's nonsense syllables developed among the many a capella male vocal groups that flourished in black neighborhoods on the East Coast from the late 1940s through the early 60s as a way to approximate missing musical instruments: *shang-a-lang* for shimmering guitars, the deep bottom of *bom-bom-boms* and *doomph, doompchs* as substitutes for bass's bedrock, and the whole constellation of *doo-wops, dooby-doos, dit dot dit dits, yip-yip-yip doo-bop sh-bops* to fill in for phantom horn sections.

Doo-wop groups varied in number from three to five or more singers, with four the standard number, more or less (two tenors, baritone, and bass). Their mythical haunt was the neighborhood street corner, but the likes of the Penguins, the Moonglows, the Cadillacs, the Platters, the Cufflinks, and the Velvetones could also be found harmonizing in the shower stalls of gymnasium locker rooms, in stairwells, in the school yard, in the front yard, even while painting a house. Strangely, doo-wop groups, who sang about such innocence and pure, unending devotion and love, were often associated with street gangs and juvenile delinquency.

And yet for both their reliance on the nonsense syllable, doo-wop is a very different

practice and art form than scat singing. Doo-wop songs are practiced, carefully constructed, back-pocket symphonies with little room for the spontaneous improvisations of scat. They are vehicles for virtuosity designed to showcase theatrics, provide room for soaring vocals or outlandish provocations on the low end. Falsettos hit notes on doo-wop songs perhaps not heard regularly since the days of the castrati. And yet these syllables and notes feel constrained and rehearsed, in their proper place in the architecture of the song, even at their most idiosyncratic.

This tension between the wildness, the hysteria of these high and low sung notes (what doo-wop singers called “the top” and “the bottom”), and the structures of the songs that sought to contain them, is perhaps what gives doo-wop its peculiar air of surreal innocence.

The lyrics of doo-wop songs are almost always comical puppy-dog pabulum, sentimental and overwrought to the utmost degree, and yet the lyrics generally do not matter — what matters is the voices that accentuate or overplay them, or the voices beneath and above the lyrics singing in another language entirely composed of dips, booms, bops and whaddas, babble and code. The sound is often lush and overwhelming — except of course when it is thin and primitive, a consequence of fly-by-night recording sessions by unpracticed groups rushed into the studio to make a quick buck, catch the snatch of royal sound someone heard while driving by the schoolyard in a pale green Plymouth Fury.

Doo-wop is a wild flowering of romanticism and courtly love in American sound, and it manages to achieve this flowering not because of its lyrical content, but in spite of it. It builds in the sky its own crystal palace of outrageous harmonies, a sonic court populated by counts, dukes, orioles, and jesters. The two highest parapets of the doo-wop castle are “I Only Have Eyes for You” by the Flamingos and “Since I Don’t Have You” by the Skyliners. No one can see where exactly it is they end.

I remember reading once about a doo-wop singer who died from having his throat slit, an idea that has haunted me ever since. Such a murder felt cosmically wrong.

I imagined the victim navigating the street corners and stairwells of doo-wop's shrouded afterworld, singing from his repaired throat, at a higher pitch than he was able to reach before.

Or a lower one.

In the climax of the 1957 Elvis Presley vehicle *Jailhouse Rock*, Elvis's character, the singer and rock'n'roll rebel Vince Everett, is punched in the throat by his old cellmate in the state penitentiary, Hunk Houghton. Elvis, jailed in the first five minutes of the movie for accidentally killing a man in a bar brawl, doesn't fight back in the scene — is a bad boy trying to make good.

Elvis is rushed to the hospital, where his doctor tells the distraught Hunk and the King's love interest/record agent Peggy, "Well, it was a close call. The blow hit him in the larynx, or Adam's apple, causing it to swell and cutting off his windpipe. We had to do a tracheotomy."

Hunk: "What's that?"

Doctor: "We had to cut a hole in his windpipe down here (gesturing to his neck just above his shirt) so that he could breathe."

(They are worried about Elvis's singing voice.)

Doctor: "A blow like that can change the whole structure of the voice box."

Peggy and Hunk have a tearful reunion with a bandaged-neck Elvis in enforced, doctor-ordered silence. Hunk tells Elvis he would cut off both his arms to the elbow to take back what he's done.

Things are quickly resolved when the film cuts to a scene a few weeks later in which a post-op Elvis is able to sing "Young and Beautiful" to Peggy. Just before, the doctor tells him, "Your larynx looks as good as it ever did" and instructs him to let go of his "morbid fancies" or else risk being a "psychological mute... musically speaking." (The doctor reminds me of the overexplaining psychologist who shows up at the end of *Psycho*, released three years later.)

The credits roll, and the music swells, and all is right with the world, but the violence of Elvis's injured throat lingers after the end of *Jailhouse Rock* like a phantom voice.

The week before I see the movie, one of my students turns in a story in which a high schooler fights back against a bully by punching him in the Adam's apple. When discussing the story in class, another one of my students, who is studying to be a veterinarian, voices the objection that such a blow, administered directly to the Adam's apple, would have killed the bully, collapsing his windpipe and choking him.

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On Friday, September 13, 2013, Gino Taffarelli went to the Chessington Oak pub in Surrey, England, to hear an Elvis impersonator sing. Taffarelli said later, "We don't go out every Friday night, but Elvis was playing there."

Shortly after his arrival at the Chessington Oak, Mr. Taffarelli took his first pint of beer out to a smoking area beside the pub, where he was attacked by two men, one of whom he had allegedly assaulted in an altercation outside another pub two years earlier. The attackers tried to cut Taffarelli's throat with a "Stanley knife" after punching him in the same vicinity.

Taffarelli: "I felt a punch to my neck but I did not realise. I did not realise how bad it was — it felt like a punch. It just happened so quickly. I did not expect it. My neck was bleeding and that.

He lunged at me. He just leapt on me with a knife." — *Your Local Guardian*, 12 March 2014.

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On Saturday, April 26, 2014, a man who had attempted to commit suicide by slashing his own throat with a razor had second thoughts about his action and stumbled into a pub called the

Monkey Puzzle, also in Chessington. The pub was full of Saturday-night revelers, who applied serviettes and pressures to the man's throat wound. He was taken to a nearby hospital and apparently survived the incident (*Surrey Comet*, April 28, 2014).

Elvis was not involved.

“[D]eep song is a stammer, a wavering emission of the voice, a marvelous buccal undulation that smashes the resonant cells of our tempered scale, eludes the cold, rigid staves of modern music, and makes the tightly closed flowers of the semi-tones blossom into a thousand petals.” -

Federico Garcia Lorca, “Deep Song,” 1930 (3)

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