

Howl

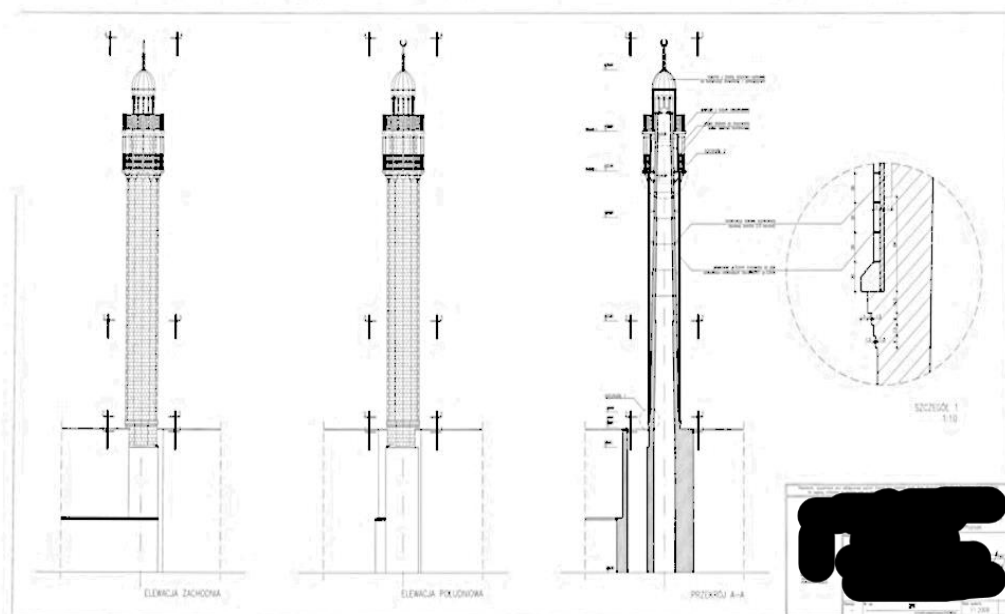
BY VICTORIA EVANS

A misheard biography in 24 fragments

These transcripts are thought to originate from recordings once stored in the Howl Archives, under the ruins of Sybilla; short-lived city state of the Phonocene.

The current location of the recordings is unknown.

Fig 1



: Sybilla

The First Singing Towers

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Automated Assistance Log A

Registrat	[#2962]
Authorisation	[287B]
Clause	[D 36'29"]
Subclause	[SURVEILLANCE REQUISITION]
Unit	[#0131 retrieval module]
Instruction.	[#00358405759]
Timestamp	[11.17]
Runtime	[multiple] [possibles]
Level	[archive 01-03]
Subject	[Visiting researcher #3579]
Status	[AUTHORISED]

PART ONE

Lost

#1: Truth

I could name half a dozen finders who are more qualified for this research than me. Roberto knew that of course, but he wasn't about to get in my way after what happened. He said I needed perspective. I think he needed me out of sight. I was too hurt; too present. Burying myself in someone else's past was a better option for everyone.

I came here to uncover the truth about Shel, the mother of acoustic architecture. But I don't really believe in truth anymore.

The rumour is that Shel was on to something big; bigger than the singing buildings she was famous for. But big enough to get her killed? Maybe. The archive won't contain a record of Shel's death. But it might tell me what she thought was worth dying for.

They knew how to listen in Shel's era. The whole culture was built on it. But even listening is a creative act. We hear what we want to hear.

My training included a module on ethics. Questions like: "should you reveal a secret the subject didn't intend to make public?". You are supposed to show discretion where the level of "reputational adjustment" or "potential harms to legacy" outweigh the scholarly value.

That's bullshit.

If you record something, no matter how intimate or private it might seem in that moment, it's a howl from your heart into the ether. Because deep down in some hidden part of your soul you want to be heard.

#2: Noise

There's nothing on the main floor of the archive that seems personal to Shel. Nothing about the rumours she was ill. I've requisitioned her medical record from the archivebots, but their responses are unpredictable.

I need to find something that speaks of who Shel was as a person; some hint at what might have happened. She isn't in any of the resettlement records, so did she die here, in Howl, before the evacuation? Or did she manage to leave with the others?

I've built my career out of sniffing out the unofficial and the unsanctioned. Roberto used to say it was because I enjoy scratching at wounds. I'm convinced there's something to be found here.

When Roberto told me he didn't want us to continue I was glad. I had no more use for his hesitancy, his torn loyalties, his selective adherence to his obsolete relationship contract. What hurt me more was the slow freezing out of the department. My colleagues could sense the widening chasm between us and they acted on it, as surely as if it were measurable in steps and paces. They chose him.

When the trip to Howl came up Roberto was so palpably relieved it stung. He almost danced me out the door. No one in the department would ever need to know I was pregnant; that he had breached contract; that he wasn't choosing me.

#3: Vibration

Howl, as we call it now, is a very noisy city. But Shel lived here way before it got that name.

It puzzled me why anyone would build a singing city on a windy cliff top. But before The Turn, the weather was nothing like it is today.

The key to understanding acoustic architecture is to rid yourself of the notion of visual aesthetics. That's not to say that Howl isn't beautiful. But in Shel's culture, how things sounded and felt were as important as how they looked.

Acoustic architecture is a way of harmonising a city with its surroundings through their resonant frequencies; their sound, or vibrations. Howl was designed to vibrate in the wind in a way that is subtly melodic, creating an ambience that was said to bring great joy to the inhabitants. It's hard to imagine now. You need ear defenders to work above ground, or you'll be driven mad.

I've read some accounts of forests in antiquity that describe a soothing effect. Apparently, groups of trees growing together could make a kind of shushing or roaring sound, depending on the weather. I've heard people say the same about the rivers, when they still flowed above ground, but that seems fanciful.

Howl, the 'singing city' was born into a much gentler environment. Back then it was known as Sibylla. Ssssssibyllla. I like it. It sounds like a whisper. A lullaby.

There's an inscription at the entrance that mentions an ancient Goddess *Sibyl*. I asked the organic who registered my visit, and she said that a Sibyl is someone who looks into the future, a seer. Seems a strange dedication for a city built on sound.

After The Turn—when the winds rose—the city became known as Howl, because its singing towers had begun to scream.

#4: Darkness

There's a fuzziness here. A resistance to being seen.

I'm sitting in a sterile audio-carrel. I can smell my own vaguely savoury armpits. My system took a long time to return to normal after it happened. Now it's just the scent of grief that persists.

My eardrums are tense. As though the timpanic muscles are straining for something that's just out of range.

When I entered the archive proper, under the ruined city, the first thing that struck me was the darkness. There is illumination—Howl wasn't a blind city. But the lights are cast in pools. Staging points. There are long unlit stretches in between and you have to hope there are no lurking obstacles to trip you. After a couple of days of feeling around though, I learned to trust the dim spaces. I began relying on my ears.

It's hard to orient yourself when there are no visible edges to the chambers. But in the lower levels—where the stacks grow sparse—there's a background hum that helps. An acoustic version of an exit sign? Or just a bi-product of the sonic chaos above?. It could be anything. A warning even. It's hard to know what was meaningful in a perceptual culture so different from our own.

Humans can't direct their hearing like landbats and cats and rats do. Bats, cats, rats. Ts. Ts. Ts. Bots. What am I doing here?

You can hear the archivebots coming before you see them. They have little corner reflectors that reveal their shape when they are close, but most of the time they hide. There's a weird change in air density when one appears. It makes my ears pop. I think they must use some kind of connecting tunnels just out of view.

I find myself wanting to speak to them as they trundle past. When one swivels its sensors up towards me momentarily, it's like the open gaze of a child.

#5: Memory

The archive is mainly graphene bonded analogue resonators. (GBARs). They were the norm for information storage in Shel's era; even more stable than the three dimensional layering we use now. After the digital age, when a millennium of knowledge was lost in a matter of decades, archivists gained the status of priests. They pass down technical know-how over generations.

GBARs aren't a visual medium, but they aren't just acoustic either. They are temporal. The technology relies on entangled particles called anyons that can remember their own histories. They can't degrade, because the information they store doesn't really exist until they are read. It's braided into the resonator via past actions that only the anyon knows. The problem is, these actions can't be observed directly, they can only be reenacted.

It's like the difference between a route and a road. Each time the route unfolds, it has to be folded back in by the particle memory, creating a new route to be unfolded and refolded again in subsequent parsings – and so on and so on, ad infinitum. It hurts my brain to think about it if I'm honest. Thank spit I only have to run the parser and transcribe what I hear.

I think of it as reading the only surviving book of an obscure language. You need to study the book to learn the language, but you have to learn the language before you can read the book. It's only when you reach the final page that you can truly understand the first. It's a paradoxical, recursive logic that we're no longer familiar with.

But just because something doesn't give up all its secrets at the first glance, doesn't mean they aren't worth knowing. GBARs are sonic. And sound takes time to be heard. I've used sound to look inside my own body. For some reason that strikes me now as very funny.

When I'm not exploring, the bots sometimes deliver a GBAR outside the carrel and I have to come out to retrieve it. Either they have a sense of humour, or they resent my presence, like their gatekeepers do. The registrars are not friendly at all. But that suits me fine, I didn't come here to socialise.

Sometimes, when I log in, I feel like they are judging me, from above their clean white face masks and immaculate lenses. I catch them glancing at things I've touched. As though they have a secret extra sense that can see the fingerprints and discarded skin cells I leave behind.

I'm never quite sure whether they belong to Shel's culture or mine. Maybe they operate in an entirely different Umwelt, one made up of greasy stains and microbial contaminants, signals as easily readable to them as their supercilious frowns are to me.

In any case, I had all the correct authorisations. I'd never have got this far otherwise.

#6: Counting

I'm having trouble sleeping.

I wake up at four thirty. My self-hatred pushes against me like a rockfall. I count down from a thousand. The great cure for insomnia and despair. A thousand, thousand, thousand numbers to pull me in to tomorrow. Counting backwards to the dawn.

I'm going to make a bed down in the archive.

Minutes of Sybillan Planning Committee
Meeting 000017

Motion A:

Proposed by Scholar Shel, Seconded by Planner Temba

We recognise that Civic Cymatic Algorithms (CCAs)- as life-scale systems that forge obligate multiple symbiotic forces between the relevant contributory elements of a city, and which typically include architecture, environment, and population - will require an ongoing full maintenance programme.

Amendment to Motion A:

Proposed by Scholar Argent, Seconded by Scholar Martic

Statement A1. We note the need for ongoing funding and support the motion to set aside 20% of funds.

Statement A2. However, we would like to draw the committee's attention to the political difficulties inherent in implementing resonance training on a population-wide scale.

Amendment Proposal A3: We therefore propose the deletion of the words "and population" in point A1 and the replacement of "full" in with "appropriate" Proposal A4 of Motion A.

Amendment passed by 61%

Motion A carried by 93%

Confidential Despatch

#00001745 (sonic weaponry)

Advisory note for the attention of sub-committee 3 of existential disaster planning provisions (Rationalised Soundings of Defensive Measures Coda 7).

Summary:

- a. Committee briefed on use of long distance covert sonic weaponry to target persons of interest using ultra low frequency wavelengths (ULF).
- b. Tightly focused, ULF are considered harmless to the wider population. However, the results of their interaction with a resonantly tuned environment remain unclear.
- c. The Committee's recommendation is to limit use of such technologies until long-term investigations can be completed.

CONCLUSION: [RATIFIED]

Buried

#7: Hum

I forgot how cold they keep it in here. And the noise of the vent is getting louder every day.

It turns out the Committee records are where things get juicy. It's tricky to pick apart, but it seems that the city was having problems with concordance.

In order for city-wide resonance to work, everything in the city: buildings, bridges; furniture; roads; had to be vibrating on harmonious frequencies. It all had to be *in tune*. Otherwise, the city would not only sound horrible, it could literally shake itself and its inhabitants apart.

From what I can tell though, the founders made a miscalculation. They didn't take the population into account. According to the GBARs I've parsed, it wasn't about population numbers. The quantity of flesh, blood and bone in the city was irrelevant. It was about the quality of an individual's *resonance field*.

I'm no Chladnian so my understanding of cymatics is sketchy, but it seems these Sybillan sound-freaks believed that people resonated, at a cellular level, on individual frequencies that were inscribed before birth. They called it "*morphogenetic predisposition*" and it meant not everybody could be offered citizenship in Sybilla. Far from being the welcoming Utopia that Shel had hoped for, biological prejudice and exclusion were literally being built in to the city's foundations.

To be fair to Shel, it's clear that she was ahead of the problem, but she couldn't get support for mass testing of living subjects.

Shel believed that cellular resonance was not fixed, but culturally acquired. Like musical appreciation, she believed it could be developed and honed by anyone, even in adulthood. She likened it to the difference between genetics and epigenetics, but her fellow citizens wouldn't allow her to prove her theories. And just like that, they took away paradise before it could be born.

Maybe Shel didn't die here at all. Maybe they drove her away even before the winds rose.

The hum is starting to bother me. It's up here in the carrel now. I'm going to take a walk around the levels again. I must be missing something.

#8: Symbiosis

I've been ruminating on Trillennial ideas about symbiosis. How, in some situations, developing a mutual dependency might be a desirable thing. Hearing a heartbeat that is not your own can certainly have a calming effect. It's hard to be alone.

I've always thought of *Symbiosis* as connected with parasites, like ticks and lungfleas, but in Shel's time it meant something else. *Obligate* symbiosis means that both parties are dependent on each other; they can no longer survive apart. I used to think that was a horrible idea.

The Trillennials believed we all originated from simple, single-cell life forms which, at some point, got together and started cooperating: Symbionts. not single, autonomous organisms, in control of our own singular destinies. They thought our bodies were made up from a collective of competing cells that had learned to cooperate for the greater good.

The corollary of this of course is, that if our cellular comrades aren't kept happy, they can renege on the truce and start competing again, to the detriment of the organism. Nowadays we might call this a canker, a disease; something unpleasant but natural. But the Trillennials saw it as a symptom. Something preventable. *Dis-ease*. Rebellious cells who were simply crying out to be heard, If they weren't listened to, what else could they do but turn on their neighbours?

I'm getting the sense that Shel thought of Sybilla as a single organism too. A city made up of millions of vibrating souls, cooperating, for a time at least, under a fragile entente cordiale.

#9: Seventh Sense

In early history it's said flightbirds used the magnetic field of the earth for long distance navigation. One of Shel's wilder ideas was that humans could develop this kind of extra sense too. A way of attuning to electromagnetic resonance fields without the need for non-biological enhancements. It's connected to her ideas about resonance but I can't quite follow the science. She talks of it as a kind of life-force.

I'm finding it increasingly hard to concentrate. The hum is difficult to ignore. Particularly because I don't know what it is or where it's coming from. It pulls at my ears demanding a 'where?' But there's no direction to be found when something is all around you. My nerves thin out until I have to pop a deafener and abandon my listening for the day.

If the bots understand my repeated questions about the source of the hum, they choose to ignore them.

The vault organics look embarrassed when I mention it, as though I am imagining things.

Maybe I am.

#10: Dead Already

I've started a kind of game with the bots. I'm convinced that, as well as servicing my retrieval requests, they've been assigned to surveille me. My instructions – ostensibly for safety - were to stay put in the carrel, and let the bots do my searching for me. This is hard when I'm not sure exactly what I'm looking for.

Whether they are being deliberately obstructive or not, requests for 'anything anomalous' have so far yielded grassy spit. What might appear anomalous to an automatic retrieval system is clearly not going to be the same as what would stand out to me.

So I've been exploring.

I wait until the bots are out of earshot and I go a little further each time. Thankfully the light pools seemed to be motion activated, so I've been able to map the territory by circling out in widening loops, memorising sensory features as I go. Portolights aren't allowed. To protect the GBAR stacks, the registrars say, but this is transparent nonsense. I think the real reason is to keep me dependent.

I've worked out that the way to dodge the bots is by staying motionless. If you don't move, they can't see or hear you. Yesterday I held still for so long, barely even breathing, that the light pools began to turn off one by one.

I've never experienced such oppressive darkness. It pressed on my eyeballs and forced its way into my lungs as if the air was solid rock around me. I felt a terrible sense of having been forgotten; lost; buried alive. As if I were somehow dead already but I didn't know it.

11: Breath

In the phonocene era they were fond of darkness, especially in civic buildings. It lent a touch of luxury to an institution, and served as an aid to listening.

Here, under Howl, the darkness makes the air seem too thick, as though it is filled with water vapour, or heavy gasses. I'm conscious of my heartbeat. And there is a curious absence of echoes, even in the larger chambers of the archive.

Once, on vacation with Roberto, we went night diving in the ocean's satellite beds. We turned off our portolights and, after a moment, we could still make out the wrecks below, lit softly by moonlight. But the water itself was no longer visible. I had the strange sensation that I was floating in zero gravity, not in water but in space.

It has been argued that fetishizing darkness was a reaction to the time of continual light that marked out the space generations. In a matter of decades the night sky was obliterated, replaced by millions of shining satellites clustered above the atmosphere. No stars were visible for years, and at the at the height of the junk crisis it's fabled that the moon could not be seen with the naked eye.

It's ironic that the culmination of the great scientific enlightenment should be an illumination that obscures more than it reveals. Humankind had to learn to see again, with its ears. To listen in order to know. The Great Re-attuning, the Clerks called it then. Now we know it as the Phonocene.

I sometimes think it might have been a better time to be alive. But it's easy to romanticise the past, because we no longer have to endure it.

I can't say why, but I have stopped feeling that I could hold a body-map together if the light went completely. Maybe it's the isolation. Or the howling of the city whenever I try to sleep. It might be messing with my inner ear. Panic was nibbling at my edges before I came here, and now it seems my judgement is being swallowed up by the darkness.

When I woke next to Roberto, I was always grounded by listening to him breathe. Even when he snored I didn't mind. He never had the slightest trouble sleeping. I found this incredibly comforting. I don't know why. I don't miss him, just his breath counting time in the middle of the night.

#12: Nausea

I didn't get up today. Headaches. Nausea.

I've started to think the theorists are right about Shel. I think somebody wanted her dead.

The hum is giving me a sharp pain now between my outer and middle ear. A kind of tension in the eardrum like when you try to hear an intruder in the dark. And my limbs are so heavy. Like being paralysed in a waking dream.

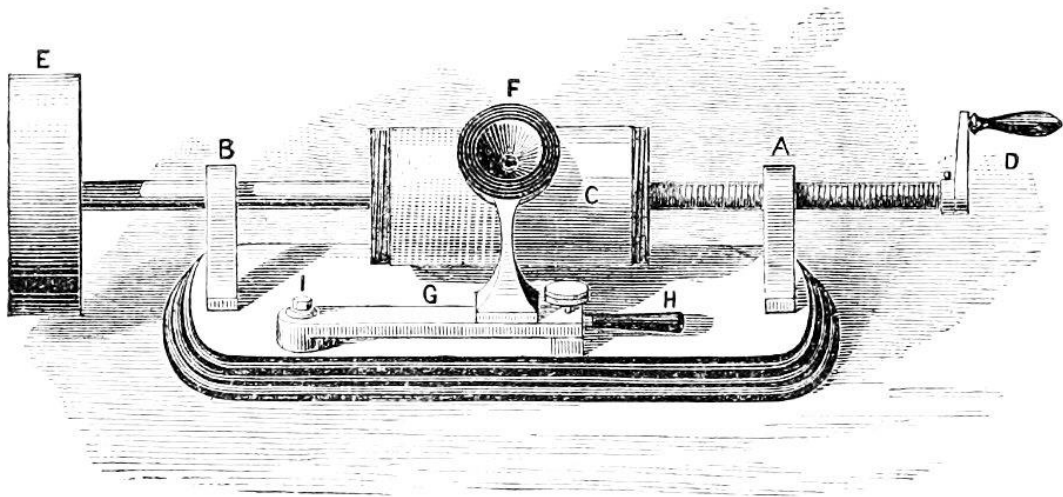
I've started to get headaches. Did I say that already? Sometimes in the middle of the night. It's probably nothing. I think I've been here too long.

I'm sure now that Shel was being targeted by someone who didn't want her to continue her research.

People say that sound is more ambiguous than sight. But the problem with sight is that we misuse it. We are too caught up with finding the edges of things. Boundaries. Categories. Taxonomies. Sound has no edges, because it has nothing whatsoever to do with objects. It's not ambiguous, just misunderstood. Sound speaks of moments, not things. It's frightening because we can't always tell where it's coming from or where it's going.

I'm not sure about what I'm doing here. I can't see the edges any more. I don't know. Maybe this was a mistake.

Fig 2 Needle lathe



Found

#13: Time

It started with some staining between my legs. It could have been nothing. I didn't even think to contact the medicentre until a couple of days later. She had been dead for weeks.

At the time I couldn't really understand the enormous grief. She was the size of a bean, but my pain grew until it filled the apartment, the street, the city, the world. The clinician said it was the endocrine sups distorting my emotions. Roberto probably thought I was grieving him. I just know I howled into my pillow for the five days I waited. And then into a towel, for hours and hours, sat on the evacuator, while my body did its gory, primitive job.

Then I was numb. And so angry. An icy rage I couldn't touch, that in millennia of medical research, there are caves in the body deemed unknowable; naturalised; some sufferings just 'normal'.

Most of all I couldn't understand how I didn't know she was gone. Ever since, I've been listening; vigilant. Straining to hear something I must have missed.

"You've got plenty of time," the medi and Roberto kept saying. They meant time to have a child. It's true. I've got nothing but time now. Stretching backwards and forwards across aeons.

As a trainee they showed us a clip of footage from an ancient celfilm. It showed a long-gone burial site somewhere in the Near West. It was a sacred cave system filled, tens of meters deep, with human skulls. Skulls upon skulls upon dusty skulls. For generation after generation, going back forever.

Ever since, I've pictured myself among them. A potshard in an endless midden of spent lives.

I guess that's why I became a historian. I used to joke that I owe it to my future bones; to try and glimpse the individual losses; the pains; the loves; buried in time.

But I can't bear to think of her there. Without me. I just can't.

#14: Attack

Ow! Ow! Ow! That traitorous archivebot just shocked me! Right in the guts. A brutal triple punch: knees; pelvis; heart. Thump! Thump! Thump! I'm still skipping beats. I could have died down there. That automated piece of midden spit. I've made a report, but whose going to send a compliance team out here on my say so? It was worth it though.

I was searching for a way down to the sub-basement. I knew I was close because I could feel a change in the air. Not quite a breeze. But I couldn't find a passage or stair anywhere near the light pools. I was scared to wander too far in case the lights deactivated and I couldn't find my way back. Since the entrance staff stopped logging me in and out, I'm not sure anyone would know I was down here.

Crouching motionless in the dark, on the edge of my known territory; I felt the vibration of a bot. I let it pass me, but then it turned sharply left, out into the dark. Before I knew it I was following, as silently as I could. It never gave any sign that it was on to me.

I had to stoop through a narrow doorway and down a slope. We were way beyond the range of the last light pools. The bots' reflectors are usually just bright enough to follow when your eyes have adjusted. But suddenly they blinked out and I was in crushing, total darkness. Panicked, I fought the urge to flee back the way I'd come; to swim blindly up for air.

I forced myself to grope onwards – expecting to trip over the darkened bot at any moment. Suddenly I could see it, glowing slightly, over to my left. It had turned a corner in the passageway, momentarily obscured. Caught up, I could see it again, but the glow wasn't coming from its reflectors. The bot was silhouetted, by life-affirming, easy-breathing beams of impossible sunlight.

It isn't just a secret, cleverly funnel-lit part of the archive. Gone are the regimented stacks, the stingy light pools, the oppressive darkness. I've found Shel's lab.

I can't tell if the bot panicked, or if it was waiting for me, planning its next move. It lunged. And in the next instant I was down, gasping and flailing, not sure if I would pass out. When I could open my eyes and pull breath again it was gone. I don't know if it used a sonic weapon or an electroshock but I had no defences if the bot came back. More than anything though, I was terrified of becoming lost in the dark without the bot to guide me out. I had to hurry.

There were instruments, speakers, vials: a soft chair, mico-pens, some kind of machinery. Nothing sterile here. It was messy; almost domestic. It smelt of dust; nostalgia.

And then I saw the cylinders.

#15: Measure

There are twenty-four of them. Only six have any marks. The others look smooth; pristine; blank. Twenty-four metal cylinders, surfaced with what feels like wax. The marks are faint. Grooves. Evenly spaced. Not a pattern as such.

They have to be recording devices. Some kind of visual analogue codec? A scriptogram? I've no idea how to read them.

I'm going to have to go back and find a parser. Or a magnifier, or whatever it is that can read this thing. I'll need to be very calm. Quiet. Listening. I don't know what the bots might do this time.

I'll need to focus. Like meditation.

Order.

Breath.

Counting.

A hundred thousand years. Nine-hundred and ninety-nine thousand nine-hundred and ninety-nine years. Nine-hundred and ninety-nine thousand nine-hundred and ninety-eight years.

Diving. Down, through time.

#16: Voice

When I came back through the dark passages for the second time, this time with the parsing lathe in my arms, I was bursting with purpose in a way I haven't been since it all went wrong.

I used to crave recognition amongst my peers. Ha! It would be ironic if I made a ground-breaking discovery now that I couldn't care less what anybody thinks.

This is for me and for Shel.

When in doubt don't interpret, just describe. Don't look for meaning. Just describe what you hear; the language; the voice. I was taught to keep these things at a distance. But who is to say where the voice meets the listener? Whether the vibrations of my eardrum are separate from me? From my history? From Shel's? From the people and places I've loved? I don't understand where those lines could ever be drawn.

Shel's voice isn't speaking from some neutral history into an empty present. She's talking to me; here; now; becoming part of my past.

...

Shel's timbre is rich and bassy. She has a firm, open palette, a touch of sand in the vowels. Her voice on the GBARs was clipped, professional. Brisk or relaxed; no excess. This is different. Breathily. Sibilant. There's an excitement to her voice. Urgency has pitched it up a tetrave. Meaning escapes through the edges of her words; in spite of them.

There's something she's not saying, but it's fizzing in her.

I'll need to go back over it many times. I'll begin the transcription tomorrow.

#17: Delay

No no no no no! I've done something unforgivable. I'm going to be sick.

She's gone.

The recording is blank. The needle parser worked fine yesterday. I heard Shel's voice, I know I did! I heard it! Why would the needle erase the sound it's meant to preserve? There's nothing left but hiss.

Is this my fault? I was too impatient. Spit! Spit! Spit!

I must have done something wrong.

How could someone so concerned with acoustics, have used such a blunt instrument for her most important work? I don't get it.

The cylinders couldn't be more different from the official records. Reverberating with energy; laughing; whispers; brimming with the sound of Shel. And now I am the only one who will ever hear this. Down here in the humming darkness.

#18: Reprise

I think I've got the first transcript from memory more or less. There was something to do with cardiac lineage-provoking genes, and codes –the numbers were something like GAT-4 and NK 5.2? She's talking about some kind of tissue engineering; finding sonic approaches for gene or cell therapy I think. I'm not trained for this. I've set down everything I can remember.

I've decided to go on. I've got to believe Shel duplicated her technical findings somewhere else as well. I've checked everything on the needle parser a thousand times and combed the GBARs for clues to adjusting it to a better spec. I think Shel must have known these recordings could be heard only once. That they could never leave Sybilla.

Who's to say she wasn't talking to me?

...

There are twinkling, prickling stars now when I shut my eyes. It's pretty.

If my headache wasn't so bad maybe I'd be able to think clearer. I am sleeping better though. I can hear the sound of my own breath.

I wouldn't go home now even if there was something worth going back for.

I am beside myself.

...

I'm going to risk one last visit to Shel's lab.

I'm so close to understanding what happened. I just need something I can use as evidence when I leave.

PART TWO

Echoes

i

Evia

You left so quickly afterwards, we didn't get a chance to talk.

I don't know if you want to hear from me now, but I thought I'd let you know, things with me and Linei are no better. I'm thinking of leaving them, but there'd be no point unless you still want me to. Life's too short to keep losing people, isn't it?

I've started a big new project in the department. I think you'd be very interested. Your skills would be really valuable.

What I want to say is it's time to come back Evia! You've stayed away longer than we agreed and I can't guarantee to hold your place open forever. It's just you now isn't it, so there's really nothing to stop us going back to the way things were before.

Anyway. I just thought I'd let you know that I'd like to forget everything that we said at that difficult time and pick up again where we left off. I already can't remember why we disagreed!

I need you, Evia. I'm better when you are here. Come back.

Robbo

ii

Roberto

Thank you for your letter inviting me to return to post.

I wish to inform you of my intention to resign from the Knowledge Centre with immediate effect. Please feel free to distribute any personal items or equipment that remain in my former office as you see fit.

The best of luck in your future endeavours.

Evia

Automated Assistance Log B

<i>Protocol</i>	<i>[visiting researcher]</i>
<i>Regulation No</i>	<i>287B clause D 36'29"</i>
<i>Unit</i>	<i>[coercion module #2174]</i>
<i>Status</i>	<i>[ACTIVE]</i>
<i>activation no.</i>	<i>[#3640000089361]</i>
<i>time</i>	<i>[12.07]</i>
<i>runtime</i>	[REDACTED]
<i>Strength</i>	[REDACTED] .
<i>Location</i>	<i>[ARCHIVE 04]</i>
<i>Frequency</i>	<i>[sub 20Hz]</i>
<i>Injury probability</i>	[REDACTED]
<i>Escalation required</i>	<i>[N]</i>
<i>Authorisation</i>	<i>[ACTIVE]</i>

Dear Learned Colleague

Further to your re [REDACTED] 56", we can confirm that researcher #3579 attended the Howl Research Centre three times during the first portion of the Vernal quarter.

However, the registrar has now confirmed that no new attendance has been registered in over two cycles and I can report, in response to your query, that her temporary lodgings have also been vacated.

May I remind you that all visitors to the archive attend at their own risk. I attach a copy of the waiver that researcher #3579 signed prior to gaining entry to the sub-levels, and I would again draw your attention to the clear warnings provided about the dangers of entering an unmaintained cave system.

As you can see, researcher #3579 was aware that the passages were unlit and contained areas of flooding and was fully cognisant that risks of entry included death or injury by drowning, rockfalls, entrapment, sonic pressure pockets, and disorientation.

We regret that it is not possible for a second search to be conducted at this time and remind you that Howl Research Centre accepts no responsibility for the safekeeping of visitors who choose to exceed the terms of their research mandate.

In lieu of reimbursement, as per the non-delivery clause as set out in the residency agreement (also attached fyi) we will retain possession of notes compiled by researcher #3579 during her visits. However, these may be released to the Central Knowledge Centre, subject to the immediate return of said bursary funds.

In warmest expectation

Archive Registrar [REDACTED] 071

Whispers

Audio-Marginalia

Cardio-rhythmic sibyllontogenesis in stem samples*

[...] through nanoarchitectonics [...] cardiac lineage-provoking genes [...] complexity of signals [...] unfolding of complex anatomy arising from supramolecular interactions [...] musical forces in cellular decisions, morphogenetic tissue regeneration, and oncogenetic resonance [...] taking into account the vibrational nature of the electromagnetic waves under the paradigm of biomolecular co-recognition. [...] GAT-4 and NK 5.2 acting as oscillators [...] to synchronize vibrational modes [...] far reaching consequences for biological identity and tissue regeneration.]

*unattributed transcriptions potentially made by missing researcher #3579 to be retained in Howl Archive pending legal adjudication.

Broadcast

GROWTH ANOMALY DETECTED

Isolated reports have reached this listener's ears of mature deciduous trees appearing in Sybilla of species that have not been seen in Central regions for centuries. Known as an extantion anomaly, this rare occurrence of species re-emergence has formerly been reported only in cases where dormancy has been mistaken for extinction, and has never before been seen in a deciduous species. Moreover Clerk Overpen from the Near West has speculated that the lack of annual rings in the trunks of these specimens heralds the long-awaited coming of smooth time and has urged adherents to prepare for great change. Our own Clerk Patrice has cautioned that these reports have not yet been palpated by the council and that adherents should turn a deaf ear until the reverberants have been fully tousled.

Fragment #19

I'm going to have to go it alone, without the blessing of the citizen cohort. So be it. I know I'm right, and I'm not going to let the petty fears of small-minded bureaucrats stand in the way of the next evolutionary step for humankind. This is one of those times when it's better to ask for forgiveness than permission.

They think I can't do anything without the civic lab, but they are wrong about that too.

I wish I could tell Aleina. She got so offended the last time I refused an invitation to her and Demit's table... She says the grandchildren miss me but I know it's really Aleina that wants my attention. I've always put her second and I am sorry for that. A child shouldn't have to compete with the needs of a city.

I've sacrificed a lot already for Sybilla. But I can't be away from my experiments for too long.

Fragment #20

I've seen the medicant about the sound. They insist it's tinnitus, but the tests showed nothing. I tried to record it, but when I played the GBAR back it hadn't registered.

I've been over-wrought like this before, once, in my early career. I remember opening my closet and feeling my consciousness sucked into it, as though I was falling, falling, into the abyss, while my body stayed in place. Then I was suddenly just standing there again, hand on the door handle, looking at my worksuits on their hangers.

I've been feeling nauseous, like back then. With a heaviness in my bones. I'm losing track of time. This shouldn't happen in Sybilla. It doesn't make any sense. I've run the algorithm everywhere but I can't find anything out of sync.

I have the feeling I'm being watched. Like I'm not the only one sharing my space. Am I losing my mind? I know I need some time off. But I don't dare leave the embryos.

Fragment #21

The cells have reacted effervescently to the new stimulation!

I'm calling the results *cardiac sibilontogenesis*, in honour of our splendid city. An affectation perhaps, but the point of the experiment is to prove unequivocally that place is part of every living system. So why not honour the city where it all began?

The previous experiments were abandoned as failures. But I'm convinced this was because of patchy environmental resonance. ER is much more consistent in Sybilla, since the perfect frequencies are imported through every new grain of sand; heard in every grain of sound.

So much of infant human development is forged by culture, but there are still questions to explore about exactly how that culture becomes part of us. I've never disputed that children learn through eyes, ears and touch - but cymatic living offers so much more... I don't think it's beyond us to achieve heartbeat synchronisation at last, if I can get permission to start early enough in foetal development.

If I didn't have to destroy the cell clusters I'm convinced we'd see stunning concordance rates. But one step at a time. I can feel myself almost back in the bosom of the cohort already!

I did wonder for a while if Planner Selick had put me under surveillance. The feeling that somebody is listening to me has persisted. Or, not listening to me really. Not watching either, but somehow *with me*. At least the tinnitus has subsided, but I have the strangest feeling that something has changed.

I'll do a full auscultation on myself tomorrow just to make sure. It can't be age related, as that presumptuous medicant implied. Seventy is not old! These Sybilborn have no respect! But that's how I like them, the cheeky silvers.

Fragment #22

Something impossible has happened.

At my age! I haven't sought endocrine system reversal. I've hardly even had tactile relations this year! I don't understand. A latency of some sort? Could my experiments have somehow exceeded their boundaries?

Retro-fertilization? At my age? Impossible, surely. I'd go to go down in history for all the wrong reasons
[chuckles]

I can hear it though, plain as pop on the auscultation. Unless I'm going mad or I've lost my hearing. I'm not sure at this point which would be worse.

[long pause]

Sybilla, it seems, is a place that invites life in spite of everything.

I'm going to have a child.

Fragment #23

They've been evacuating for months now. The winds have risen to intolerable levels. The city is howling.

We can't leave, so I just keep telling my colleagues and neighbours "Tomorrow. Tomorrow." They are too worried about themselves to think too hard about an old woman and her strange 'adopted' toddler.

When the winds came they came suddenly. Much faster and fiercer than was ever predicted. It's so funny to see Syo talking to them. He gets that amused look on his face and the air around him seems to dance for a moment.

My experiments worked. Just not at all in the way I had expected. I had no idea that my own child's heart was becoming gradually synched to the city's own resonance each time I treated a new batch of stem cells.

They need each other now: Syo and Sybilla. Syo's heart never developed an sinoatrial node, so it can't operate independently. He's missing a pacemaker. His heart relies on Sybilla to produce a beat. It's similar to what I was trying to achieve with my stem cell experiments. But Syo's heartbeat isn't just synched to the city's resonance fields, it is reliant on them. In all respects that matter, the city is his heart.

I wonder if Sybilla has grown dependent on him too. Where he walks there seems to be a quieting of the oscilla, or so I imagine.

So we are not leaving. No matter how bad the winds get. I'm very frightened. But while I stay close to Syo I don't think the city will hurt me

It's funny how quickly he stopped needing me. He listens to the wind now, to the buildings, to the stones. He screams and laughs at the oscilla in delight, as if they are making sweet, sweet music together. It helps me tolerate the howling.

Fragment #24

He's taller than me now, my little boy is all grown up.
And when he puts his arms around me and laughs at
something his old lady mother has gone and done, I feel
hugged by the whole city.

My city.

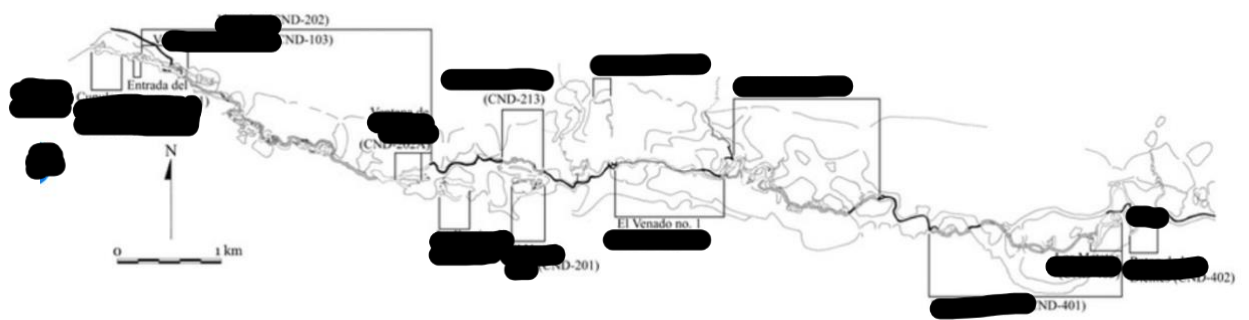
My boy.

He doesn't talk to me anymore. He's too busy talking
with the earth and the towers, and the seeds that are
still sprouting and growing here in spite of the wind.

And that laugh!

When he giggles it's the mirth of springtime; the
bubbling of streams reaching right through me. It's the
sound of life, and hope, and of a thousand, thousand,
thousand tomorrows.

Fig 3 - Howl Archive



Acknowledgements

Howl is dedicated to people with or without wombs, who have experienced their presence or absence as nurturing, irritating, disappointing, healthy, painful, expectant, functional, debilitating, inhabited, empty, borrowed, under-researched, miraculous or irrelevant.

And to my mother, who misremembered.

With thanks also to the conversations, truths, places and fictions—always already misread, mistaken, misrepresented, misunderstood and misheard—that helped birth this story. Especially:

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Grateful thanks also to Kelly Krumrie and Neil Wells for their helpful comments on the manuscript.

Images:

Figure 1 (Singing Tower) Toorabally, Muhammad et al. Impact of Modern Technologies on Islamic Architecture in Malaysia and Middle East, Nova Journal of Engineering and Applied Sciences, 2016 [accessed 13 July 2023]

Fig 2 (Needle lathe) Edison talking phonograph [Popular Science Monthly 1977 via Wikicommons; https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:PSM_V12_D740_Edison_talking_phonograph.jpg] [accessed 9 June 2025]

Figure 4 https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-Candelaria-Cave-system-drawing-by-Mirza-Monterroso-Updated-version-of-inset-in_fig6_259429616 [accessed 7 Jul, 2023]

Note:

Phonocene is a concept from Vinciane Despret and Donna Haraway (2020. RIBOCA2 online series of talks and conversations, dedicated to LANGUAGE. Online: YouTube: RIBOCA)