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GONG BATH

The overlapping orbs
of sound and declension

by Mary Cappello

All I had said was “mood” and “sound” and “envelopes,” in response to the question, “What are you working on?” when a friend of mine invited me to a group event, or an individual experience, I wasn’t sure which. It would require twenty dollars, she said; it would last for about an hour. She said she’d thought I’d really get a lot out of a “Gong Bath.”

Immediately I pictured a take-me-to-the-river experience. I think I thought a midwife might be present. I needed to know if nakedness was a requirement, or if a bathing suit was optional. I imagined a toga, or endlessly-unwinding winding sheet. The water would be turquoise-tinted and warm—bathtub-warm but bubbleless. Everything would depend on my willingness to go under—to experience a form of suspended animation. No doubt sounds would be relayed to me—underwater healing sounds—to which I’d be asked to respond with my eyes closed, all the while confident I would not drown.

Then I remembered how my mother was ever unable to float and how her fear of water fueled her

determination that my brothers and I learn to swim early on. My mother can’t swim, but throughout my childhood she writes poetry in response to the call of a nearby creek that she studies and meditates near. I maintain an aversion to putting my head under water even after I do learn how to swim. How can I ever push off or dive deep if my mother cannot float?

Swimming won’t ever yield the same pleasure for me as being small enough to take a bath in the same place where the breakfast dishes are washed. No memory will be as flush with pattering—*this is life!*—as the sensation that is the sound of the garden hose, first nozzle-tested as a fine spray into air, then plunged into one foot of water to re-fill a plastic backyard pool. The muffled gurgle sounds below, but I hear it from above. My blue bathing suit turns a deeper blue when water hits it, and I’m absorbed by the shape, now elongated, now fat, of my own foot underwater. The nape of my neck is dry; my eyelids are dotted with droplets, and the basal sound of water moving inside of water draws me like the signal of a gong: “get in, get out,

get in." The water is cool above and warm below, or warm above and cool below: if I bend to touch its stripes, one of my straps releases and goes lank. Voices are reflections that do not pierce me here; they mottle. I am a fish in the day's aquarium.

The Gong Bath turns out to be a middle-class group affair at a local yoga studio, not a private baptism in a subterranean tub. The group of bourgeoisie of which I am a member pretends for a day to be hermits in a desert. It's summertime, and we arrive with small parcels: loosely dressed, jewelry-free, to each person her mat and a pillow to prop our knees. We're to lie flat on our backs, we're told, and to try not to fidget. We're to shut our eyes and merely listen while two soft-spoken men create sounds from an array of differently sized Tibetan gongs that hang from wooden poles, positioned in a row in front of us. Some of the gongs appear to have copper-colored irises at their center. In their muted state, they hang like unprepossessing harbingers of calm.

At its furthest reaches, science's mood is poetry, at that point where it gives up on controlling the things it studies, agreeing instead to a more profound devotion to spare sounds whose tones the mysteries of existence brush up against asymptotically: the rustle of pages weighted with results, the fluttering of questions pondered in obscurity, the settling of a log on a forgotten fire, the hiss inside the grate. Even in its earliest incarnations, the science of acoustics turned to water as its scribe by dropping a pebble on a liquid surface—plunk—and watching the rings around it form. So, too, mood finds a home in circles and widening gyres: the geometry that accompanies mood—whether fore-, back-, sur-, or gr- is "round." And now these gongs waiting to be struck are also ringed, from darkest center to shimmering edge.

Even if I'm the sort to be eminently seducible—ever in the mood for love—I'm not sure that makes me a quick study. I'm a ready convert to any religion, keen to smuggle its riches into

the waters of a deeper understanding: this art. Which might explain why my first Gong Bath was so affecting, but the power of suggestion is only part of it. If sound's amplitude is full enough and the roof beams not too low, if the human subject is surrounded on all sides by sound, she really has no choice but to give in to it.

Our guide explained that the sound of the gongs had the power to fill up every particle in the room until a bath of sound was formed—a Gong Bath. It was true: the sound was so highly resonant and painstakingly slow to fade that I began to feel awash in it. For a person who hates to swim, I was amazed by how the more the sounds filled the particles that made me, me, the more I felt that I was living in some blissfully underwater place without the need to come up for air. Sometimes the sound was bowl-like; other times, it was bell-like. Think of the sound achieved by running your finger around the circular edge of a glass, but the glass is made of felted metal or of wood. Sometimes the sound was snared, faint as the needles against paper on a lie-detector test, or birds' feet stick-like in snow. What sounded like water pulled forcibly over pebbles made me feel my body was literally raked. Other times the sound was a booming trundle, loud enough to liken you to early theater-goers who fled their seats convinced by the screen's illusion of an oncoming train in 3D. But you stay your course, not knowing what's next, only that the gong's most powerful effect has been to enliven one part of you while making another part supremely groggy.

I know it will sound like I was tripping if I say I felt as though I was dropped down a watery chute inside a Gong Bath. The sounds slowed things down to the point of a drugging of my inner voice: suddenly that voice was the cab of a hot air balloon that I had to climb up into to enter should I ever feel the need to return to it. Is it possible for the mind to revert to pure sound? I began to have a feeling I'd never known before: my eyes weren't rolling backwards into my head—this wasn't exactly an ecstatic state;

behind their closed lids, my eyes felt as though they were sliding to either side of my head. This must be what happens to us when we die, though I wasn't for that moment afraid of dying.

The lover's discourse—any word uttered by the beloved—takes up residence in the lover's body and rings there unstoppably. This pang that requires Roland Barthes to halt all occupation he calls "reverberation." Without the aid of microphones or speakers, the sound of gongs materializes and reverberates in the supine body—for my own part, I felt sound enter though the palms of my hands and the heels of my feet. In the concert hall, a cough or sneeze, whisper or crunch is a too ready reminder of the body of our fellows in the room. At a rock concert, we maybe sway or sweat together in a half-high haze but are careful still to keep the edges of other bodies a-blur; we pitch our tent on the edges of group oblivion. In the Gong Bath, other bodies are nodal points that sound bounces off of. I felt sound bounce off the body of the person next to me, onto me, and on down the line; I felt it in my stomach like a pang.

Here we might want to pause to distinguish between auditory hallucinations and auditory hallucinogens, with the Gong Bath a form of the latter. Was I letting myself get all New Age kooky, producing a form of socially acceptable psychedelia that has no basis in fact? That sound can affect the central nervous system goes without saying. That sound can therefore be harnessed therapeutically to allay pain or alter the course of a disease has never been the drawing card of modern Western medicine. A little research can go a long way, and a student of mine once made me aware of prescribable sounds, or "audioceticals." Vibroacoustic Therapy is discounted as simply silly, along the order of overly priced vibrating easy-chairs, until someone gives a sound massage to a person with Parkinson's and finds that circulation is enhanced and rigidity decreased. White noise as a treatment for ADHD, vibrating insoles to help the elderly maintain balance, or the

space-age sounding SonoPrep—a skin-permeation device through which a blast of low-frequency ultrasonic waves opens a pore in the skin in lieu of a needle—suggests territories we’ve barely begun to broach. Though neither I nor anyone I know has been offered a non-invasive therapy tool that can liquefy tumors of the prostate and the breast, or sonically bore a tiny hole into an infant’s deformed heart-valve, the sound technology and its practitioners apparently do exist.

What’s this got to do with mood? Applying sound to mood is not my method; I want to make sidekicks of mood and sound, to consider them in sync, then see what emerges from that thought experiment. Oceanographers tell us that sound moves faster in water than it does in air, but isn’t air part liquid? They say they can measure qualities of sound that are impossible to hear. They observe that sound pushes particles together and pulls them apart, and that sound is the effect of a material’s compression and expansion. When they add that the speed of sound in water is dependent on night or day, temperature, weather, and locale, I begin to feel I’m in the realm of sound with mood. So too when they describe a dolphin’s “kerplunk” as a slap of a tail on water to keep an aggressor at bay; when they note a whale’s “moans, groans, tones, and pulses,” and a seal’s underwater “clicks, trills, warbles, whistles, and bells,” I begin to glimpse a mood, part-sea.

A philosopher steps in and says the body itself is a skin stretched over resonant matter beneath. We are our own water filled drums of emotionality and indigestion, of sounds and moods. A poet parts ways to say that water is sound; sound creates moods; all mood is aqueous sound.

It’s the feeling a Gong Bath gives of encountering sound beneath a threshold, submerged, and then absorbed that makes me ally sound with mood as liquid. The Gong Bath doesn’t affect my mood—it’s the model for a mood; it is a mood, and it can’t be reproduced. It says that mood and sound meet at

the place of touching. Sounds touch me, and mood is the window of allowance, wide or narrow, to let sound in: my moods are equivalent to what I let myself touch, and be touched by in turn, but also what I have no choice in the matter of being encased in. A tongue stuck to a cold pole; bare feet in mud. The bare of your back; the sting of my words. If I were a cat, touch would create a purring machine; if you over-touch me, I swat. Give us this day our daily sounds. How conscious are we of our ability to create our own soundscape exclusive of earbuds? How will you tune your day? What will you tune into with no instruments at your disposal but your whistle and gait?

Lest I seem to idealize my twenty-dollar experience, I should note that fifty minutes was way too long a time for listening to gongs. Five minutes would have had the same effect, but the gong players wanted to give us our money’s worth. Every Gong Bath since my first one has left me cold. They’ve really flopped. The second one I attended was on the far other end of the continent from the first, but the guide, it turned out, had trained the people back in Providence, Rhode Island. The room was too small, and everyone felt nervous. Nor was the atmosphere improved by the suggestion that we could have the same experience if we only bought the leader’s home-made CDs which he stacked and unstacked in a sad little pile at the beginning and the end of the class. The third and final bath was headed by an overly self-conscious woman who talked more than gonged, who sang songs whose lyrics likened humans to totemic animals, and called upon the healing winds. It was cold in the room, and some people wrapped themselves in so many blankets that they appeared as a row of impenetrable pods or middle-aged campers devoid of starlight.

What happened to me in this Gong Bath is that I never got past the all-too-probable tendency to supply an image to every sound I heard, even entire narratives. Though the images were as unconsciously imbued,

inexplicable, and private as those one experiences in dreams, I remained a translator stranded upon a shore and not a bather, immersing down and in. The images were dark: a boy shivering in his coat before drowning; my open mouth attempting but unable to pronounce the name of the person nearest to me in life and longing, my long-term partner, Jean. There was a Toucan and a typewriter, an avalanche of marbles, a body encased in wax. Having stirred up some unpleasantly tinged flotsam and jetsam, the Gong Bath left me feeling bereft, unlike great music “that move[s] us,” as Peter Kivy once wrote, “because it is expressive of sadness,” not by “making us sad.” Sad music puts us in an exalted mood, rendering us capable of experiencing the expression of sadness.

In order for a Gong Bath to work, sound has to obliterate language for a spell so we can touch mood’s casement, its resonant shell. We have to be coaxed by sound to suspend our image-making tendencies even if pure mind like pure sound is impossible. But why should we try? After my first Gong Bath, I was convinced the phenomenon was going to become the audiocultural fad for twenty-first century Americans. It could join the ranks of our half-understood borrowings from traditions not our own, providing an opiate to the all too comfortable classes, a soother to a whine. My prediction was a way of denying that I was in search of something, of an experience, deeply felt, and not just an observer doing fieldwork. I wanted to be invited to go under while you provide the sounds, to shed anticipation and bathe in curiosity, alive for a spell in the day’s aquarium. □

Excerpted from *Life Breaks In: A Mood Almanack*, forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press in fall 2016.