



By Bennett Kuhn // **Open Heart** (2019) is an original essay-album composed at Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York City and on Long Island during May 2019. It is available to stream below via Soundcloud pending its digital release on Astro Nautico in July.

BENNETT KUHN // OPEN HEART

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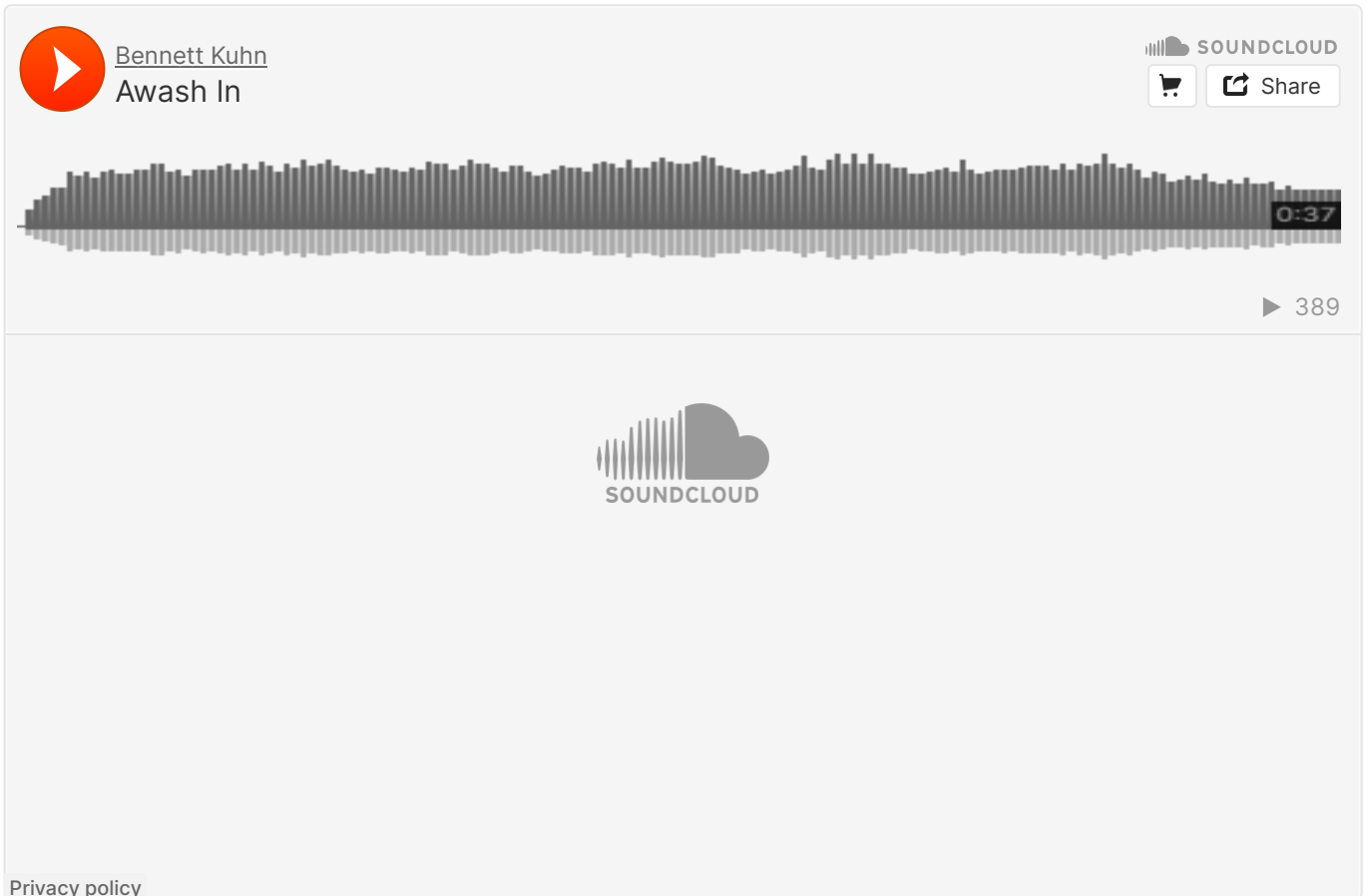
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Bennett Kuhn – *Open Heart* (2019)



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- 18 Underwater Lamentation (0:50)
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- 26 Remembering The Hospital (0:45)
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- 28 ____-rythmia (1:25)
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Awash In

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0:37

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§1

The halls of 7 West blanketed our voices with a soft hum. You drifted again. The faint electric glow of rectangular Westside apartments cast a dull horizon over Central Park's interminable twilight. Beyond the ward, the cavernous lobby had emptied, and streets soaked up rain, dribbling down nebulous subway tunnels in my mind's ear, cars screaming like some abyssal choir. Heart and lung and city incarnate breathed together in layers compressing and expanding, cascading folds of one accordion or sound wave diffracting in air. When dawn came, I left for the hotel, trusting Mom would plant by your side to weather the vertiginous morning. Another witness for the mystery of healing.

§2

It is customary to translate *amanecer* (a noun and an infinitive verb) as *dawn*, but in Spanish it sounds more gerundive, like *dawn-ing*. Orient the process. Register how when the sky palpitates

navy and barely crimson, changing impossibly slowly and also tectonically decisively, it is sunrising.

In the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche writes about lightning and its flash. Language reifying doers and deeds and deigning to congeal agents where really there is just a world of animate agency, flowing action.

Medicine could treat people like that: transformative performances of their own healing. People as circulating; people as carrying.

§3

After school, you and Mom worked in Midtown and I took a job at Shakespeare & Co. down on Broadway selling playscripts to NYU students for minimum wage. It was winter of '10, and I couldn't cross the street without stepping in some pool of frigid opacity. Everything was unforgiving and frozen, Dad dead only one year.

In the bookstore, I practiced distraction, thumbing through books of short stories and essays I could easily abandon behind the register on rare occasions when actual work was incumbent. One day, I read about Ben Burt's sound design for the original *Star Wars* films. He recorded the ominous rumble of the iconic star destroyer flying through space at the beginning of *Episode IV* by mic'ing up a motel air conditioner in disrepair, slowing the tape, and boosting bass frequencies in equalization.

We cross into hospitals half expecting to be out of the world. Then horror lays claim to the mundane.

§4

2012, just before the crash: you asked if I had even slept. I just snapped at you and avoided the truth: that I'd been awake for a week on end, high on no sleep and no food, seven sunrises, seven sunsets. Through tears, one foot out the door, you said I was scaring you, that I reminded you of Dad.

Days later, I was rounding off one of my meditative circumambulations by the window at the end of the psychiatric ward when, in the doorway of the last room on the left, an Israeli woman held a hand to her forehead, slouching, her other hand on her stomach. I asked if she was okay. She said she just couldn't get a handle on her malaise, that it felt like her room was oppressing her and the medical staff would not listen to her. I asked her what about the space was so negative. She said it's just everything, the sound of the air conditioner even. Said she was "going crazy."

I asked her to listen with me for a moment. The derelict A/C thundered away with a whooshing around 60Hz, droning like a massive dreadnought. I imagined the woman's worries amplified in this signal and redoubled in stereo. Trebly rattles jangled above in unpredictable, incessant reminders of chaos: little emblems of whatever had already collapsed in her life. Everything you would never intelligently introduce to someone suffering from anxiety.

I told the woman about star destroyers and air conditioners. That the world was full of vibrations fundamentally real and unnerving and manipulable. That we are sensitive people, not crazy, just in need of sounds that would suit our bodies and the project of healing.

§5

It was terrible to be in in-patient care as a listening person. Not because of some *One Flew*-style sonority of patient abuse. Whatever screams I heard came from a television.

Huntington Hospital had placed a piano in the common area of its psychiatric ward, positioned on the opposite side of a glass divider separating a large T.V. area. Due to the glass sectioning and the size (some 60") of the television unit, there was no part of the common space free from having to see the images displayed there. Medical staff left the television's volume on a loud setting so as to include aging patients in the experience. The effect was to lock all patients in the panoptical gaze and panaudicist earshot of the device, compelling patients to perform the behavior of watching.

It made me angry to witness fellow patients, folks who had been institutionalized because of loneliness, sit there immobilized watching advertisements selling normative futures and cannoning out unfiltered local news stories of murder and cruelty, a nightly catalog of audiovisual atrocities.

The only interventive tool at my disposal was the piano. No one had so much as touched it in the entire week I'd been there. Without asking permission, I sat down and let my hands drive my playing without much thinking, feeling through them and the vibrations outward, to the wall of glass and through it, maybe even out the steel door confining us, against walls in my mind that for years had kept my hands slowed by heady schemes of control at the keyboard. I fought against patience and the notion of virtue wholesale. I played to drown out the television commercials selling love for cheap, the maudlin personalities and their porous affect, against the dreadful air conditioning – until a nurse gently placed a hand on my shoulder and said my playing was too “stimulating” for the other patients.

Better the numbing din of school shootings.

§6

You came to see me those next days in the psych ward. I wanted you to break along with me, to hurt in symmetry. I said you had an eating disorder and were afraid to live your own life and rebel against the boundaries set by our parents. I said you liked music and soccer because I liked music and soccer, that you were refusing to form yourself and grow autonomously. I said I'd never go to therapy if you wouldn't also. You endured these pains, went home, and came back the next day.

Your resilience taught me that our positions were more different, radically so, than I had even known. That difference is always becoming the condition of care between us.

§7

In an introductory sociocultural anthropology course at a community college on Long Island that I took as a senior in high school, we learned about an indigenous language in which dozens of words could be translated as the single verb *to carry*. Each word would describe a different aspect of what is being carried (*i.e.*, size, weight, shape, contents, etc.). It sounds like the fabulation of a crusading white social scientist. Still, writing about sound in the hospital and my body, my experiences – maybe writing at all – returns me to envy for this deep lexicon of carrying.

§8

Before I was born, they had already cut into your heart and placed an object there. Heart as talisman against ahistoricity.

§9

Tetrology of Fallot appeared in my world when you shared that YouTube video of Jimmy Kimmel on television describing his son's congenital heart defect and the medicine that saved him. I had never known what your birth defect was called. I was riding in a taxi in Manhattan, the little screen in my hand showing Kimmel shedding his troglodyte chauvinist character from *The Man Show* in order to champion universal health care ("No parent should ever have to decide if they can afford to save their child's life."). I let it move me, the image of the vulnerable guardian, father in tears. I wanted to believe in a time when Dad was that for you, as strong as he was vulnerable. A dream, I know.

§10

I never remember the verbiage of major disclosures. Not when Mom called to say Uncle John was dead, nor when Dad called to say he had ALS. Not break ups; not first loves. I can't carry such language.

When you called to say they found something about your heart at your routine physical, I prepared for anything, even something terminal. I wonder now if that was a form of nonchalance, some

indifference or paltry resignation to fate? Or was it mindful non-attachment, something about being the younger sibling and knowing my place in the order of things?

(One of us must die first.)

In whatever words you used, you conveyed that they would have to cut you open again, a pulmonary valve replacement, and that you may not live as long as Nani, but that this medical procedure would strengthen your body, and you would hopefully live healthily for a very long time.

All that mattered to me was that none of us had been with you in that hospital room, that you must have felt so alone. I began to fix my schedule for a spring in New York.

§11

I read Leslie Jamieson's *Empathy Exams* in April. Jamieson describes her lover's stake in her health after having cardiac surgery. His care is divorced entirely from the messianic gusto prompted by Hollywood's patriarchal male heroes and the trite romances they muscle out of the world. Jamieson's man is a hero of care. His big act is to lay down beside her in the hospital bed, a glorious couch potato full of intent to just be there, with her, listening, circulating through whatever indignity or ill fate might come.

We know that listening is its own ministrations.

§12

The piano in the central lobby of Mt. Sinai's Guggenheim Pavilion is positioned to project its tones up the curvatures of glass scaling the height of several cathedrals. These reverberations form a protective shell encapsulating the dry acoustics of pain and soothing on the interiors of floors above. Between professional pianists' appointed hours of performances, the instrument is bolted shut.

§13

From our hotel on 93rd, I carried instruments to the hospital: sound recorders (iPhone, cassette recorder); musical hardware (Teenage Engineering's OP-1 workstation, the Gakken SX-150 Mark II analog synthesizer, a Stylophone rhythm machine); and the instrument of my body. Together they shaped an orphic medium to block out the tedium and delirium of spending all night by your side or in awkward public spaces; also a canvas to paint projections of your anger, confusion, frustration, and pain; an emotional sieve as if to drain something bad out of you; a sedative to relax inquietude; and a stimulant to ward off sleep during crepuscular vigils.

§14

Music in the hospital felt like a violation. At first, I moved surreptitiously, hiding my bag of things or making sounds that camouflaged with the looping pops and gurgles of the hospital. Later I came to understand the hospital staff would not take my music from me. Nurses and doctors in Mt. Sinai's cardiothoracic medical facilities inquired about the OP-1 and my work not as a matter of surveillance but with genuine interest and encouragement. They thought it looked and sounded like a piece of medical equipment.

§15

Consider The Cow, a ring modulation and delay effect that brings a colorful digital bovine creature to the OP-1's display. How random that this Swedish synthesizer instrument, on loan from an old friend, in my life only for a matter of days, should feature of all animals in its programming the cow. After you had just had a piece of one inserted into a valve of your heart.

What is unpredictable can disturb fate but also settle it.

§16

In December, Nani's congenital heart failure worsened. Her cardiologists said this would likely be her last Christmas with us. We had no idea then that you would have to see a cardiologist within months.

We sang Christmas songs quietly over Nani's sleeping form, "Silent Night" and the like. At one point someone proposed we sing "Hallelujah."

§17

As we were prepared to visit you post-op in the ICU for the first time, I heard the piano in the lobby playing the chords of "Hallelujah" awash in stories of oceanic reverb. I conjured the image of David with his harp, warding off harm. I prepared to host the intention of that music for awhile.

§18

Nani survived the scare of the holidays and turned 99 in Simonetti fashion. She continues to grow and change. We laugh that worry is what's saving her. It was a boost to her health when you told her about your surgery and how you planned to convalesce with her in Merrick.

§19

What is the heart? I found myself asking that in the hospital and afterwards in a mock philosophical way.

The heart as the center, the core, the middle of all. A location, a thing maybe; also a role, an agency: the central throughway, circulator, pump, switchboard of flow, director of direction.

Then personified attributes: courage, bravery, clemency, mercy, love, emotion, spirit. The Tin Woodman.

And iconography: I <3 NY, social media shapes, emojis, ASCII; dispersed visual origins.

§20

We loved playing Hearts as a family. As a kid, I used to wonder why, if a heart is a symbol of love, it should cost a point to receive one.

§21

Your heart became for me not the center or the point of intersection of all things but rather a line of perpetual flow. No longer an organ centered within you, it connected palpably now to the scene engulfing us, threads of affect stitching through you like your sutures, cords of recovery to both keep you together and pang when stretched. The stress levels of your various interlocutors, the medical staff, me, Mom, and your friends, all fluctuated along with your condition in an emergent choreography. I learned to address your heart's circulation in them.

§22

You said Tetrology of FalloT but I heard *flow*. Recording on the OP-1's four-track sequencer, I imagined I was building a quadripartite sound circulator, fourfold heart from out of music.

§23

Cities and their arteries. The OP-1's FM receiver kept me attuned to undulating soundworlds outside the hospital. When the opioids put you under so hard you wouldn't even feel the chest tubes pushing against your lungs, I matched the violence of it, sampling harsh noise and fashioning tough guy trap anthems in a shadow boxing stance.

In peaceful hours, I sculpted ocean waves out of white noise swells to wash us with tranquility. FM static became sine tone melodies that you couldn't yet hear, but I carried them digitally, saved, symbols of my hope for your resurgence.

§24

Mom used to say to me, "You're a lover, not a fighter." She wanted my first reaction to a conflict to be the search for a "peaceful solution." To be "a diffuser rather than an abuser." It made sense to drive me away from emulating Dad's macho flights of protective ultraviolence.

Now I think there was never something I really loved that I wouldn't fight for; and nothing worth fighting for that I didn't love.

§25

Tom Rice's *Hearing and the Hospital* takes mediate auscultation (the practice of listening to a patient's chest with a stethoscope in search of diagnostic information) to be both a site of knowledge production for medical professionals and an affirmation of the "sonorousness" of human bodies, disclosing "the body's dual acoustic nature."

I like the idea that auscultation is not just detective work, ears invading in service of a cold rationalist stance of knowledge acquisition, but rather a way of humbly petitioning what the body already knows and holds. "You are an expert in your own health."

§26

The last thing I did saying goodbye to you in pre-op was to put my ear to your chest to listen to your heart. Immediate auscultation: old as Hippocrates. It sounded frantic and strong.

§27

After your doctor pulled the last of the tubes out of your chest, you gasped for air and found a new discomfort, a sound within; your lungs were "crackling" because of fluids in your chest cavity. At first, it was so loud to you that you asked me to sit farther away. You thought it would disgust me and embarrass you. I had to show you by putting my ear near your chest that I had no access to this sound besides how you described it, that it was inaudible to anyone else.

For days you found the best angles to recline in order to minimize the phenomenon, but it remained louder (to you) than your earpods, practically tinnital.

§28

I didn't know you were always going to be okay. I just tried to ground myself in unknowing. To sleep and rise when predicated. I never lied to you. When in the dimmest moments you asked me when I thought you could leave the hospital, then we whispered what we knew: that tomorrow was cresting and your heart was beating. Dawning. Invincible sister.

§29

I wish you were there when you finally fell asleep in the ICU. The lights had dimmed in every bay. EKGs and drip equipment no longer cried harsh and alarming rhythms. Gentle bleeps concealed themselves in themselves like crickets on a Long Island night, chirping for your June baby birthday.

Was it okay to play my instruments here? I asked the nurse. No problem. Mediate auscultation: listening with the medium of music. I listened in on your heart and sometimes my own, then Mom's and Dad's, Nani's, Elizabeth's of course, and other family and friends, other lovers. Not eavesdropping, just imaginatively reaching sonically: forehearing: clairaudience. Matters of the heart circulate; each song becomes a word for carrying.

Bennett Kuhn is musician-in-residence at Synapsis for the '18-'19 academic year. His music and critical writings engage spaces of care medicalized or otherwise across topics of mental illness, ALS, chronic kidney disease of unknown causes and birthing, dreaming, empathy, and grief. Follow Kuhn on Instagram, Soundcloud, and Twitter (@RADIOKUHN). Thanks to Elizabeth Weinstein, Jesse Kohn, Lee Clarke, and Paul Baisley for reading, Nicole Saylor and the staff of Mt. Sinai Hospital for caring for my family, and Evan Shornstein and Sam Obey for generously loaning musical equipment. Dedicated to Paige Marie.