
Dysfluent Waters

d d d d d d d d d

d d d

d

tableaux of dust

)discontinuous,

unwieldy, (br bbb bbbb bbbbbb bbbbbb
bbbbb bbbbbb bbbbbb
bbbbb bbbbbb bbbbbb

5'05"

6'05"

River folk not just because we waded in the water.

Not just because when Tubman sang
"Moses go down in Egypt, /

Till ole Pharo' let me go; /
Hadn't been for Adam's fall, /

Shouldn't hab to die at all,"

that meant whites were nearby
and we needed to stay hidden
behind (th th th th th th

When I visited
bass like tiny hills
I saw the place
as an image
of my stutter:

the continuity of water
in the cloister fountain;

the discontinuity of stone
in the architecture;

and the prayers, chants, and songs
through which the monks tried
to marry
the two.

solo flute starts blowing out candles

They called us river folk
cuz we met on the bank of the Potomac
at night,
and sang across (t t t t t t
t t t t t t
t t t t t t
)to the slaves (i i
)in Virginia.⁷ i i

5'15"

6'15"

)the trees.⁸
Not just because Moses' name means

"to pull out of the water,"⁹

impediment is a flowing mountain

when Moses Moses and
Moses and when
Moses Moses when Moses went
Moses
and Moses went up
Moses Moses,

not just because each one of us was Moses,

not just because SHE was THE Moses,

not just because
Moses had a speech impediment,

but because of what
historian John Spencer Bassett
)wrote about us:

flutes circle the mountain like falcons

"About the beginning
of this century
when the large Collins plantation
on Lake Phelps, Washington County,
was being cleared

a number of negroes (
)just from Africa

5'25"

6'25"

5'35"

6'35"

5'45"

6'45"

5'55"

6'55"

were put on the work.

One of the features of the improvement
was the digging of a canal.

Many of the Africans succumbed
under this work.

7'05"

8'05"

When they were (

d d d d d d d d d d d d d d d
)disabled

they would be left
by the bank of the canal,
and the next morning
the returning gang would
find them dead.

7'15"

8'15"

prone supine prostrate

They were kept at night in cabins
on the shore of the lake.

At night they would begin
to sing their native songs,

saxophone growls down into new ground

and in a short while
would become so wrought up that,

7'25"

8'25"

utterly oblivious
to the danger involved,

they would
grasp their bundles
of personal effects,
swing them on their shoulders,

drums flow down from the mountain shouting:
and setting their faces towards Africa,
would march down into the water
singing as they marched

7'35"

8'35"

lift yall faces!

till recalled
to their senses only by the drowning
of some of the party.

the pianos have not forsaken us

they bring back the morning

lift!

The owners lost a number of them in this way,
and finally had to stop
the evening

7'45"

8'45"

singing."¹⁰

a smaller shout brings the storm and the grief

7'55"

8'55"

drums disperse to their separate countries

9'05"

10'05"

when in fact I have.

The current (*tr tr tr*) just hasn't surfaced.

we are left right side up in a swirling thirst for wisdom

9'15"

10'15"

I saw an image of this
when
an otolaryngologist
performed a fiberoptic
laryngoscopy on me

and I watched my vocal cords

at rest,
speaking,
and blocking.

*a family of saxophones announce:
Mother Earth is endlessly generous
honor her in your climbing and your research and your laughter*

9'25"

10'25"

When I blocked, *tr tr*
I saw my vocal cords (*tr tr tr tr*
tr tr
tr tr tr tr
tr tr
tr tr tr tr
tr tr) tremble.

I saw the word's journey,

its not-having-arrived.

The bow is bent

but the arrow still hasn't flown.
track ends

The contra-diction
of stuttering
is that I am both speaking
and not speaking.

9'35"

10'35"

Mid-sentence I block on a word.

Sound stops coming from my mouth,
but I haven't reached the end of my thought.

9'45"

10'45"

The current of my speech
has just
gone
underground.

Or I block
on the first word of a new sentence.

9'55"

10'55"

It sounds like I haven't begun
speaking yet,

NOTES

1. See Marc Shell, *Stutter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 238. The original quote is: “Mesmes la langue prend encoires quelque nature des eaux, qui changent la voix et les langues, et faict que ceux qui demeurent pres des rivieres, sont begues le plus souvent, et ont la langue grasse, et si parlent autrement que les autres.” I asked Rachel Valinsky to translate this passage: “Even the tongue still takes after the waters, which change the voice and the tongues, and make it such that those who live near the rivers most often stutter and have a thick, crude tongue, and if they speak, speak differently than others.” See Guillaume Bouchet, *Les Sérées*, vol. 5 (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1881), p. 89.
2. See Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of O. Equiano, or G. Vassa, the African* (London, 1789) and Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
3. I learned about this event from Katrina Dyonne Thompson, *Ring Shout, Wheel About: The Racial Politics of Music and Dance in North American Slavery* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), pp. 61-62.
4. Derek Walcott, *Tiepolo's Hound* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), p. 116.
5. Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory” in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memory*, ed. William Zinsser (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), p. 99.
6. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, xi.
7. See Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, p. 68.
8. See Sarah H. Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn, NY: W. J. Moses, 1869), p. 27.
9. See Exodus 2:10: “When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, ‘I drew him out of the water.’” *Tanakh : A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society 1985). But, as usual with etymology, it’s actually more complicated. Other theories about the origins of Moses’ name have been offered.
10. John Spencer Bassett, *Slavery in the State of North Carolina* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1899), pp. 92-93.

This transcription of “Dysfluent Waters” is from Jerome Ellis’s multi-faceted project *The Clearing* (book published by Wendy’s Subway; album of the same name released by NNA Tapes, both 2021).

Each page of the transcription corresponds to sixty seconds. The roman text corresponds to the spoken and sung “lyrics” of the track; the italic text (excepting book titles and the names of slave ships) is a description of the audio. Ellis’s stutters—his clearings—are rendered in real time on the page.

Designed by Rissa Hochberger, with additional design by Jerome Ellis and Kelvin Ellis, the book *The Clearing* is the eighth title in Wendy’s Subway’s *Document Series*, an interdisciplinary publishing initiative highlighting the work of time-based artists in printed form.