

sky blue piano figure galloping toward the morning sky

0'05" How can thinking about water d ) ayo. d d)dysfluencies, blacknesses, 0'15" The English language imagines speech as water. The words "fluent" (d d d d d d d d 0'25" second piano line plumbs another depth can melody dismantle the clock )and "dysfluent" )"fluere," "to flow." And the sixteenth-century French theorist Guillaume (b b b b 0'35" bb b b b b wrote that people who live )to stutter.1 0'45" What do we make of the sonic similarity third piano line like a gold ribbon embracing more than we can imagine between the Latin words "balbus" (stuttering) and "babulus" (fool or babbler)? 0'55" In the shadow of Babel percussion offers repercussions

the babbling waters create my babbling body.

Black thinkers from Olaudah (eeeeeeee eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee	1'05"
observe that blacknesses are inseparable from the Atlantic and Indian (0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0, 0)	
and Indian (o o o o o o o o o o o o o o o o o o o	1'15"
The Amistad, The White Lion,  Serpente do Mar, Postillion.  horizon begins trembling Postillion left London on	1'25"
February 7, 1704 and arrived in Gambia on March 3.  One hundred slaves were purchased.  a Sometime during the ship's passage to Virginia,  a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a	1'35"
the ship's captain, (j j j j a  a j j John Tozer, j  supplied a, "drum (a a a j j j j j j j j j j j j j j j j	1'45"
for the captives in the hold.  a saxophone footfall  a a  This was a common practice, as many slavers believed that having musical instruments on board made the Middle Passage	1'55"

a

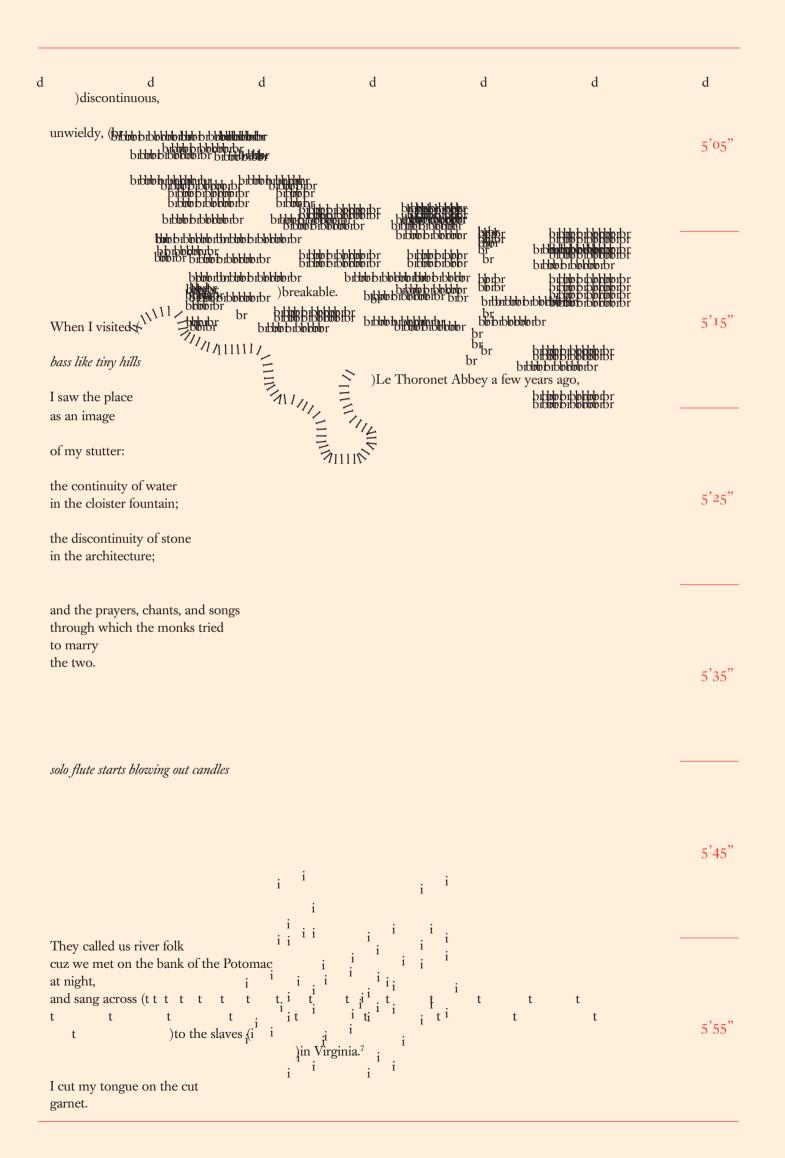
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the saxophone gasps upward
                     for the captives.
2'05"
                     One day Captain Tozer
                     and his crew were performing
                     their normal duties on the main deck,
                     while down below
                     the Africans played
                     the instruments loudly.
                     The crew listened.
2'15"
                     crescendo
                     gathering fabric and cloud
                     pillar
                     fire
                     As the Africans played, they used the music to muffle
2'25"
                     the sound biblible ibir
                     of their ( bribbin
                                   br bootstander
bror boots
bror boots
                                            bubble blocking shackles.
                     Several rose from the hold,
                     attacked the crew,
                     and injured seven
2'35"
                     members.3
                     a shout
                     three on the floor
                    bass loops protect anger
fuzzy Rhodes
we lift our eyes to the mountain
2'45"
                     For Derek Walcott,
                     "water has one tense
                     and cannot
                     run backwards."4
2'55"
                     and the mountain calls us
                     in tongues of saxophone
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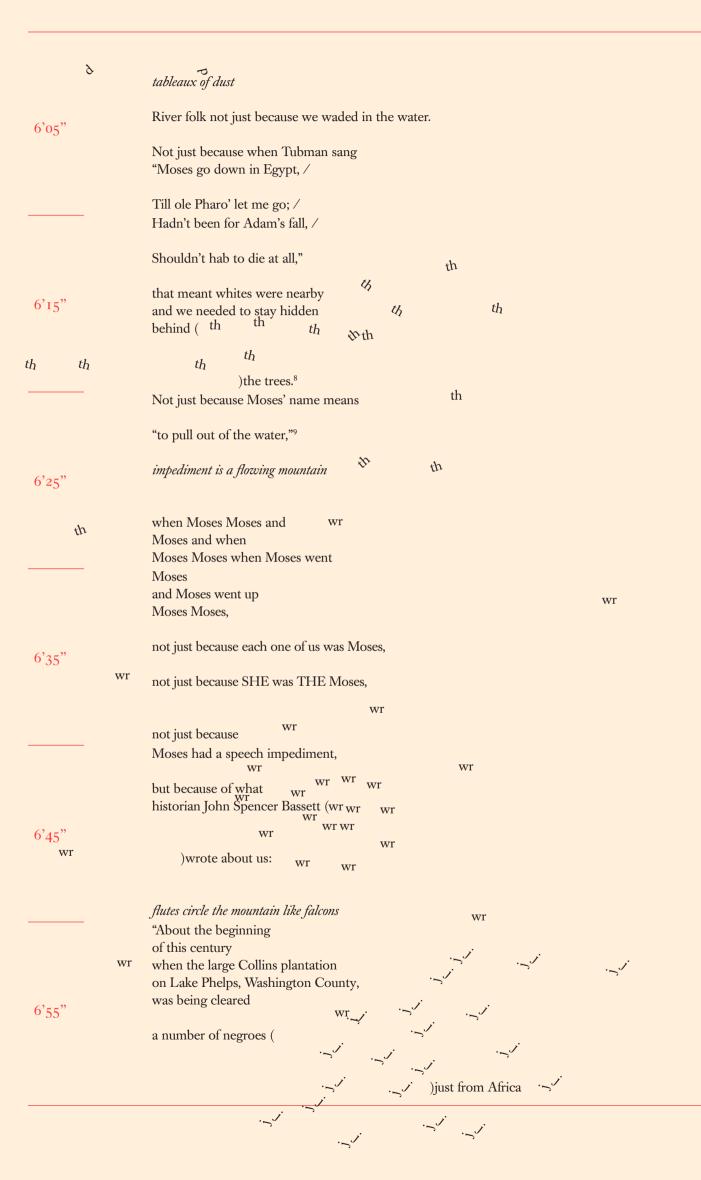
"easier"

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For Toni Morrison,
 it has "a perfect memory."
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       3'05"
She writes,
 "You know, they straightened out
 the Mississippi River in places,
 to make room for houses
 and livable acreage.
 Occasionally the river floods these places.
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      3'15"
 'Floods' is the word
 they use,
 but in fact it is not
 flooding;
 it is remembering.
 Remembering where it used to be.
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       3'25"
 All water has
 a perfect memory
 and is forever trying to get back (t t t t t t
                                           t )to where it was."5
                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       3'35"
विवाद के विव
 a form
 of perfect memory?
 drum dem go under
 Is the stream
 bass go under
 percussion dem come up
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)dysfluent speech

remembering where it used (t t t 4'05" flute begins its fable Are my glottal blocks floods? What if fluency is like the straightening of the Mississippi, severing orality from a prior fullness? 4'15" drums return 4'25" But of course, speech isn't just water. I too borrow a thought from ( 4'35" )Je bâtis à roches mon langage."6 I build my language with rocks. 4'45" dddddddddddddddddddddddddddddddddygfluent, but lapidary. And not lapidary as in elegant 4'55" Rhodes plunges and concise,





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"
When they were ( d dd ddd dd dd dd dd d	
d d d d d d d d d d d d d d d d d d d	
they would be left by the bank of the canal,	
and the next morning the returning gang would	7'15"
find them dead.  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,	
and in a short while	
would become so wrought up that, utterly oblivious	7'25"
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	7'35"
singing as they marched	
lift yall faces! till recalled	
to their senses only by the drowning of some of the party.	
lift!	-,,,
The owners lost a number of them in this way,	7'45"
and finally had to stop the evening	
singing." <sup>10</sup>	
a smaller shout brings the storm and the grief	7'55"

05"		
	saxophone growls down into new ground	
15"		
	the pianos have not forsaken us they bring back the morning	
25"		
35"		
	snare practices vehement refusal	
45"		
55"		

drums disperse to their separate countries	9'05"
we are left right side up in a swirling thirst for wisdom  a family of saxophones announce:  Mother Earth is endlessly generous honor her in your climbing and your research and your laughter	9'15"
	9'25"
The contra-diction of stuttering is that I am both speaking and not speaking.	9'35"
Mid-sentence I block on a word.  Sound stops coming from my mouth, but I haven't reached the end of my thought.  The current of my speech has just	9'45"
gone underground.  Or I block on the first word of a new sentence.  It sounds like I haven't begun	9'55"

speaking yet,

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when in fact I have.
                   The current ( .___/.
                                     ) just hasn't surfaced.
10'05"
                   I saw an image of this
                   when
                   an otolaryngologist
                   performed a fiberoptic
                   laryngoscopy on me
                   and I watched my vocal cords
10'15"
                   at rest,
                   speaking, and blocking.
                   When I blocked,
                   I saw my vocal cords (
                                         tr trtr tr
                                         tr tr
                                         tr trtr tr
                                         tr tr
10'25"
                                         tr trtr 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.
10'35"
                   track ends
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10'45"

10'55"

## **NOTES**

- 1. See Marc Shell, *Stutter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 238. The original quote is: "Mesmes la langue prend encores 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 JJJJJerome 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 JJJJJJerome 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.