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I Strain My Ears

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I STRAIN MY EARS

Wherever I go, there are car noises, electric noises; my ears have no chance to rest. Saying that, I wonder: what would happen if I found myself cut off from the sounds of civilization?

On a long drive across North America, from the West Coast to the East (was it somewhere near Texas?), I turned on the radio. It was saying strange things like: "With a strong antenna picking up out-of-state radio stations, we're on top of the football action."

As I crossed this vast land at expressway speed, I passed through the range of an AM radio station in an instant. To find the local stations I had to constantly turn the dial. It was more trouble than you could imagine.

Car noises, electric noises.

I made a discovery driving at high speed (the speed limit is fifty-five miles an hour but I usually keep it at sixty-five). On guard against car trouble, I had to put my nose and ears—the olfactory and audio senses—to work. Though it's easy to think the visual sense is more important, and of course it is, there remains a special need for the nose and the ears to capture suspicious odors and off-beat echoes.

There's an expression *mimi wo sumasu*. It's a common phrase in Japanese, but I wonder what would happen if you translated it into English. Of course, I'm sure there must be a similar expression . . . "to strain one's ears" perhaps. I think the use of Japanese may be less defined. *Mimi wo sumasu*. When written in phonetic *hiragana* instead of pictographic *kanji*, the echo's shadow starts to change.

We strain our ears for music. At those times we can't help noticing that we are straining our ears for a unique shape. For shape, form, structure, pattern.

The picture is from New Mexico near Santa Fe. It's of the blue sky I saw from my motel window. I may have been trying to refresh my tired audio sense by taking a picture of peace and silence.

The Rio Grande makes a huge fissure in the earth. Around there the planet shows its fissures and textures. It's a place with many red clay buildings and Indian villages.

Captured by the color, while straining my ears, I may have taken the picture to escape from car sounds, from electric noises (though there is no escape). The thing called a photograph surely has the essence of silence.

I strain my ears for shape. I strain my ears for color.

ARRANGING CHAOS

I made an altar. Though that is what I say, it's an extremely simple thing; I don't know if it's appropriate to call it an "altar." I wonder if I should call it an "alcove" arranged in my own style. I went to the woods and gathered a handful of plants resembling dead trees; then I arranged them in the corner of my room with hospital white walls—I think I'll just say that I threw them in the corner and left them standing around my transistor radio.

While back in Japan for about ten days last September, I visited the Kunisaki Peninsula, where mystics hovered and hermit priests popped up behind every mountain and at the bottom of every valley. I bought a mask of a woman, of the type used during festivals there. Actually, I was planning to give it to Professor Paul Engle, my trusted mentor, who collects masks from around the world. I'm not sure, but I suppose after writers from around the world go back home, looking at a mask may be a way of remembering the mug of a certain, faraway writer. Once I sent Mr. Engle, a seventy-two-year-old poet, a mask of an arctic fox I had found in Tsuruoka of Yamagata Prefecture. But temporarily, I hung a mask of a woman on one of my white walls.

Within a short time (well, about two months), the corner with the dead trees, illuminated with a five-dollar lamp bought at a place called K-Mart, began to throw delicate shadows across the wall; and then, that mask of a woman became a permanent fixture there.

On the small desk I use as an alcove (I believe they call it a coffee table), beside the dead trees and radio, is a small Indian doll, a painted Mexican clay serpent, and a potted rubber plant—all sitting on a Japanese scarf, a table cloth. Oh, and to the lower right of the mask is the yellow cap of this year's World Series champs, the Pittsburgh Pirates of 1979.

The radio is always set on WJZZ (Detroit's FM jazz station). Once I counted the FM stations in Detroit and found twenty-six.