

(In)audible: A Confession

By Mirela Cufurovic

Blankets of snow cover the earth below, hiding the colours of Spring yet to come. The air is crisp and so, so cold. The wind howls, its sound unsettling, and brings with it a chill so deep it feels like blood could freeze. While towering pine trees groan under the weight of snow, mountain peaks remain stoic, never flinching. And on this ever-whitening day, is my mother running toward home, with me, a newborn, in her arms, fleeing for safety.

The winter did not only bring with it a chill. It brought bullets, too.

My mother cradles me—all bundled in knitted blankets, mittens, scarves and caps—and prays for relief. For herself. For me. But she remains, shivering, the clothes on her back not enough to keep her warm. And I remain, too, screeching, crying, restless in my mother's arms. There is no soothing melody or lullaby or bundle of warmth that can quiet me down. The earth of Bosnia and Herzegovina remains in a frightful state, sending howling winds and thick, wet snow down from its skies, trying to fend off the enemy encroaching on its territory, killing its people. But my mother does not think about the bullets whistling past nor the bombs dropping down nor the anger of the earth beneath her feet. Her mind, her heart, her body is tethered to me: a wailing child in her



arms who, in the month since God gave me life, has not ceased to cry.

The biting cold and screeching wind does not relent; it seeps through the scaly bark and long, emerald needles of the pine trees, menacing and unforgiving. Still, my mother runs, head low and me tightly cradled. When she looks up, a blanket of white greets her from a distance—a clearing signalling home, but also death. She slows, cautious, and in the space between safety and

In the brief moment of unconsciousness, the world around us is quiet, still. And when my mother wakes, the effort to see, to hear, to breathe is so immense that she contemplates, briefly, if she should let the falling snow kiss her skin into oblivion.

exposure, she pauses to adjust the cap on my head, pulling down the sides to cover my ears.

I protest, screaming. “*Sbbb*,” my mother pleads as she looks up toward the clearing, certain death was coming for her, for me. “*Molim te, molim te, dušo, smiri se. Sb-sb-sbbb!*”

Just as her lips press softly against my forehead in a desperate attempt to quiet me down and reconnect, the air seems to suck away between us as thunder roars across the sky and collides with the earth. *Boom!* The impact is so strong our bodies collapse, and we separate.

Debris and dust and smoke the colour of black and grey seep through the gaps in the trees and press themselves against their leaves, the air, the snow and our bodies on the floor like fine powder. In the brief moment of unconsciousness, the world around us is quiet, still. And when my mother wakes, the effort to see, to hear, to breathe is so immense that she contemplates, briefly, if she should let the falling snow kiss her skin into oblivion.

Then she hears my screams.

She reaches for me, an arm’s length away, and pulls me toward her. She wipes the black and grey from my face, tracing the nose that is my father’s and wipes a speck of dust from my eyelashes. She

readjusts the bundle of blankets to fit tightly against my body and for a moment more, she watches me, her cobalt-cerulean coloured eyes in awe that I’m still with her, still alive. *Hvala Bogu.* She adjusts the cap on my head that is askew, pulling it over my forehead to hide wisps of golden-brown hair, like hers, and the sides of the cap over my ears.

As she does, my wailing intensifies.

My mother’s eyes widen. *Njene uši!*

The scene plays like a movie in my mind as my mother relays her experience and still, I struggle to convey the depth of fear and cold and her love for me into coloured brushstrokes on canvas. It’s my final art project of my senior year in high school and I need to impress. So, I cling onto the reflections of my own mind hoping for a spark of inspiration.

I am five, and bumptious sunlight flares over Country. Sulphur-crested cockatoos take flight in the sky, and I watch their stiff, broad and rounded wings beat unevenly above me. *Flap, flap, glide.* I mimic their movements with my arms, pretending that I, too, have washed-yellow underwings. *Flap, flap, glide.* As the crackle of cockatoos land on the nearby school garden, feeding on fruit and pea and sweet corn or grapes,

seeds and the offshoots of vines, I watch one take flight up high, landing gracefully on a branch in the tree, the shade overhead its solace and protection. I imagine it the protector, ready to let out a loud and raucous screeching noise when danger creeps by. Then a cacophony of exaggerated *g'daaaaaay*'s fill the sky and I realise, with a start, that the cockatoo up above has let out its warning cry.

Uh, oh, here comes danger.

I avert my gaze from the big blue sky to the two people now emerging from my kindergarten classroom, a few feet away from where I stand watching the cockatoos. It's my mother and my teacher. My insides constrict at the sight of pink seeping from my mother's cheeks down to her neck making the red capillaries on her skin more translucent than before. *What is she afraid of?* But I knew. She was afraid of me—for me. I wanted to look away; to let the guilt and shame engulf me but her distress would not allow me the indulgence.

"She not want listen," I hear my mother say. "She in her head—lost, confused—always thinking about something else."

My teacher nods. "I understand," she says, "but I think she might have some form of hearing loss, and I recommend that she sees an audiologist. She's attentive most times, she just needs help to tune more directly in to her surroundings."

Ann-dee-ob-lo-jist, I say to myself liking the flavour of the sound on my tongue even if it

leaves a sour aftertaste when I swallow. I strain my ears to listen to the conversation further, trying to make sense of the words and their meaning, but the effort to hear feels immense, so I turn my mind elsewhere and seek the sounds and the yellow of the cockatoos. But there are no sounds and there are no colours. It is quiet, the cockatoos having fled from their danger.

Was I meant to flee, too?

I skip toward the awning nearby and grab onto a pole and spin, spin, spin until the world around me blurs and I can no longer see my mother's heartbroken face.

I imagine what bird song sounds like, a melody so unlike the raucous screeching sounds of cockatoos. Marigold and magenta and indigo and umber and emerald flash across an azure sky, their musical colours painting the sky this way and that—a kaleidoscope of beauty.

My head begins to feel fuzzy, and I stop spinning. Now a new sound greets me and it's not the musical colours of bird song but an annoying *buzzzz* followed by a whine as if a dog is nearby, seeking attention. *What was that sound?* My hands go to my ears. *It's my ears!* The whining stops as I find my centre of gravity again and—

My mother, my teacher, the trees, the garden, the walls all around run from me and leave me, their bodies and shapes becoming a speck in the distance and all I can do is watch them go, go, go. I shut my eyes, unwilling to witness their abandon. Only when my heart slows and my breathing steadies do I reopen them, and to my

surprise, the world is the same; my mother remains by my classroom door with my teacher, and the walls hadn't left nor the garden and the trees. Even the faint sound of cockatoo screeches float across the sky.

I run toward my mother and cling tightly to her skirt, desperate to keep her tethered to the lines across my now clutched palm. As I watch the movement of my teacher's lips, I catch the same two words again: hearing loss.

I am eleven, and I think of a moving train as the sound of *toot, toot, toot* repeatedly penetrates my eardrums. I remember lines from a fun fact book I received for my birthday a few months before, a gift from my mother, and instead of focusing on the sounds coming and going from one ear to the next, I recall:

Did you know?

A train is a row of wheeled cars that are linked together and pulled by a locomotive. Steam trains need coal, fire, and water in order to create steam and turn the wheels. An electric train gets its power from overhead wires that run along a track. When the electrical lines overhead have been interrupted, the train halts.

Did you know?

The inner ear is a small compartment in the skull that contains structures responsible for hearing. The structures convert sound waves into electrical signals.

This allows the brain to hear and understand sounds. When the electrical signals are interrupted by damaged auditory nerves, no sound is created.

My thumb hovers over a red button on a chunky device attached to wire that is a tangled mess with others and as I refocus my mind on the *toot, toot, toot* sound coming from the headset over my ears, willing my inner ear to deliver the sound successfully, static electricity zaps my skin and prompts me to press the button—on cue.

“Right, think we’re done,” the audiologist says, and it sounds more like a question than a statement, as she fiddles with the headset and the tangle of wires. I turn to look at my mother; she’s crying. Now with the phantom *toot, toot, toot* ringing in my ears is the *la-dub, la-dub, la-dub* rhythm of my heart. It races like a train picking up speed. *I stuffed up.* I try to focus on the movement of shiny, gloss-covered lips, the brief flash of white teeth revealed through a smile, and the jumble of sounds that follow. The audiologist points at red and blue lines on a sheet of paper and I notice immaculate French-tipped nails so unlike my stick-on ones from the dollar store. I slip my fingers beneath my thighs.

The audiologist hands over the paper to my mother. “Because her hearing falls within the forty-fifty decibel range, your daughter has mild-to-moderate hearing loss and will need to wear hearing aids.” The sound when paper pulp meets plastic follows as my mother pulls a tissue from

its box and nods. “The good news is her hearing should remain stable overtime.”

Is it good news, though? To forever be stuck with the same sound waves floating in and out of my ear, unable to penetrate the walls of my ear drums?

I imagine the shape sound waves make and how they move in and out my ear. Do they look like the mountain peaks of Zvijezda or the skyscrapers of Sydney? Do they float, tranquil, like the golden petal of a *lijljan*, curved like an ear, on a water’s surface or do they beat, steady, like the resting heart of a sleeping koala? And would their shape and size and colour matter at all in their delivery of sound and if yes, is there hope still?

“Hearing aids will not change the degree of your own hearing loss,” the audiologist says, her gaze on me, but the sound of a snuffle from my mother breaks my concentration and I look over at her, a mistake because her tears have now become my own. Seeing my distress, the audiologist pulls a tissue from the box still held by my mother and hands it over to me. She continues: “But what the hearing aids will do is change the acoustic signal reaching your ear so that your auditory system can make better sense of the sound, and this will help you hear better.”

Bett-ab. Bett-ah sound. Bett-ah hearing. *Bett-ab, bett-ab, bett-ab.* The more the audiologist speaks, the more my mother’s tears stain her cheeks, the more I feel a shard form in my gut, threatening to tear me to pieces.

In the car, on the way back home from the audiologist’s office, I bite at the stick-on nail on

my thumb, my mind like scattered jigsaw pieces. I fiddle with the hearing aids with my free hand, too afraid to wear them, to learn all the new colours of the world they would unlock for me. They feel foreign, objects of intrusion, with their wires and dented shapes designed to fit perfectly in my ears. I open and close the battery compartment, the faint feel of a *click* satisfying and realise that they will need me as much as I will need them.

The trees, the buildings, the cars all blur past as my mother hits the accelerator with blinker lights flashing and turns onto the M4. She reaches out for my hand, and I let her take it. And although the warmth from within her palm feels safe and full of love, I struggle to believe her when she says: “*Ne brini, sve će biti ok.*”

When we arrive home, my brother is the first to greet us.

“Wanna play?” he asks me as he bounces a tennis ball up and down on the red concrete beneath our feet. No “what did the audiologist say?” No finger pointing and “eww, why do you have to wear *that*?” Just: wanna play. I watch his honey-kissed hair move in rhythm with the bouncing of the ball. The shard in my gut slowly starts to dissolve.

I put the hearing aids into my ears.

“Let’s play.”

Ka-thump! I watch the tennis ball hit my square and bounce toward my brother as a fun fact assails my mind from my little book of fun facts.

Did you know?

The fuzzy texture of a tennis ball is called a nap. The texture comes from different materials like wool, nylon, and cotton. This texture also helps decrease the speed of the ball as it hits the ground, which then gives players more control. In 1972, the International Tennis Federation switched the colour of the ball from white to yellow to help viewers see it better on their television screens.

The ball comes back and I hit it hard with my hand, but in a way that it touches the red concrete beneath it with an attitude—in a sleight of hand kinda way.

Ka-thump, ka-thump, ka-thump! Off it goes out of the square.

“Oi, don’t hit it so hard!”

I smirk. “Then you shouldn’t play against the best if you’re gonna sook.”

My brother huffs. “I’m not getting it.”

“Such a sook.”

I run off down our long driveway.

Thunk! Thud? Click? Clunk? The sound of my footfalls is unfamiliar.

I spot the yellow shade of the ball. It’s hidden behind colours of red, purple, blue, pink, yellow and white daisies. I rub off the brown smeared across the fuzz of the ball. It is mucky, the garden bed wet from recent rain. Satisfied that the ball is no longer covered in muck, even if now slightly wet than before, I throw the ball up in the air and

catch it out of habit and a whoosh follows its up-down movement.

“What’s taking you so long?” I hear my brother call.

For a moment I hear the *weeeeeee, weeeeeee* of an ambulance siren and wheels against rain-washed bitumen. I look toward the road for confirmation, expecting the emotional urgency of flashing lights to illuminate the street in hues of blue, but the street disappoints. When my brother calls out again, the siren returns, and I realise it’s his voice. My heart constricts. I don’t know how I feel about this whole new world that’s been unlocked for me; how I feel about not hearing my brother’s voice from a distance the same way again.

I run back toward him. “Round two?”

“No, cause you’re a cheater.”

“*Pfft*, am not.”

“Are too.”

“I don’t know why you’re sooking anyway,” I say. “You always do the same move toward me. And the one time I do it, *wah-wah*.” I know I should be more kind. He accepted me without question, after all, but the overwhelm of the day has crawled under my skin and I can’t help but bite back. “Sook all you want. I won!”

Defeated and upset, my brother opens the flyscreen door to our house and—

The unpleasant shrill that follows the closing of the door eats away at my bones. Goosepimples rise against my skin in protest. I drop the tennis ball, and it lands with a *thud* just as my hands

All I want to do is run away—far, far away—to a place I can hide and never come out. To a place that will give me nothing but the silence I so desperately crave.

reach for my ears.

As the sun sets into the horizon and the days turn into nights, restlessness overcomes me from the tips of my fingers to the tips of my toes, while asleep or awake; everywhere and all at once my mind concocts scenarios only designed to frighten. I see bells, bells, bells and loud colours exploding and vibrating in irregular beats and tunes all around. Ears and hearing aids suddenly appear, with arms and legs, dancing, taunting, jiggling. As they near, their cartilage begins to melt until I see only the skeleton of the inner ear and all its parts. The hairs inside are dead. The nerves unresponsive. The electrical sparks barely *zip, zap, zapping* into currents. I try to scream, to cry, but no sound comes out until—

The *shriek, shriek, shriek* of brazen bells causes vibrations to dance through the air and land on my skin, its shrieking beat seeping into my pores to thrum violently against my chest and between my ears—a turbulence!—waking me from my stupor. Only, I haven't awoken from a nightly slumber, but from a terrible daydream in the middle of school recess.

How embarrassing.

Schwop. Fizz. Crunch, crunch. Slurp! Drip, drip, drip. Ahhhh.

My hands instinctively find my ears and a low whine follows as the hearing aids adjust to the

friction my fingers produce. I wince and lower them, but the effort strains me. The sounds all around me are too loud, too violent, too much, just like the daydream only moments before. *Is this what it's like to bear without hearing aids, too?* All I want to do is run away—far, far away—to a place I can hide and never come out. To a place that will give me nothing but the silence I so desperately crave.

I look at all my friends. They seem to have taken no notice of my entering La, La Land. One friend is in the middle of biting into her sandwich, mayo smeared on the corner of her mouth, her silicone bracelets tangled on her right wrist. One is uncapping her water bottle, some water spilling out dangerously close to her new Nike SBs. One has a bobby pin between her teeth ready to fashion her fringe into a pouf at the front of her head. One is intently focusing on her red framed Tamagotchi device, attentive to her virtual pet's fragile lifecycle, afraid if she neglected it, it would die. And the others are fidgeting with this and that, conscious of the little time we have left before the bell rings again to signal the end of our school recess.

It's now or never, I tell myself.

"Hey guys," I say, "I wanna show you something." Like meerkats, my friends all look at me expectedly. The sight eases some of the

trepidation thrumming through my skin, and still my hands shake as I pull out a hearing aid from my ear and hold it out toward them. Their eyes shift from my face to my open palm.

“What is that?” the friend with silicone bracelets asks.

“Um, a hearing aid,” I reply.

“Since when do you wear that?”

“I got them a few days ago.”

Silence.

Then the friend with the Tamagotchi asks:

“Does it feel weird wearing it?”

“A little.”

“Can you, like, still hear, um, without, um, them?” The friend with mayo smeared across her mouth asks in between bites of her sandwich.

“Do you have to wear them all the time or...?”

I sigh. “I can still hear without them—obviously—but they just help me hear better, I think.” I turn the hearing aid over with my fingers. They still feel so foreign, unfamiliar, strange. “My audiologist tells me that I have mild-to-moderate hearing loss.”

I look away from my open palm to study their faces. Anxiety grabs me by my tongue and forces its way into my oesophagus to travel down, down, down into the pit of my stomach and nest. But it does not enjoy solitude. It invites Pity and Shame to follow along, too. *Are they . . . sorry for me?* “Besides,” I add before tears threaten to spill out and indulge their pitiful stares. “I don’t have to wear them *all* the time.”

My friends nod, feigning understanding—

oblivious to my lie.

I try to focus on the slow *crunch, crunch* sound of a sandwich being squished between teeth, the *glug, glug* of water being chugged down, and the *beep, beep* of buttons being pressed on a Tamagotchi as I withdraw my palm and pull out my other hearing aid with my free hand. I rest my palms onto my lap and notice a missing a stick-on nail on my right thumb. In that moment, I wished I had pockets. To stack my hearing aids away, never to see them resurface again.

Desperate to leave, I announce: “I gotta go toilet.”

“I’ll come with,” says the friend with the pouf before I could say anything in protest, much less make an escape. She hooks her arm with mine and guides us toward the Ladies. What she says next will never leave my heart. “I think it’s pretty cool you wear hearing aids.”

Did you know?

Edgar Allan Poe coined the term *tintinnabulation* to describe the sound of a bell ringing. His poem *The Bells* was posthumously published in the magazine *Sartian’s Union* in November of 1849. It is a poem that examines the human experience.

Oh, the bells, bells, bells!

What a tale their terror tells

Of Despair!

How they clang, and clash, and roar!

What a horror they outpour—

I let my tears fall.

The ticking of the clock goes unnoticed as my mind races through my memories. But where earlier I had three blank canvases, now watercolour paint splatters across them as I try to bring my story to life: how far I'd come toward self-acceptance. As I stare at my handiwork, the softness of the watercolour bringing with it a feel of past vulnerability, I wonder if I should be more daring and bolder, to show the world that shame and guilt no longer live within me.

Canvas One

A little girl stares into the distance, her mouth agape, her eyes shining with eternal possibilities. Brown curls frame the side of her face, its colour deep and dark unlike the soft watercolour touches all around. Her side profile reveals the anatomy of the inner ear: a cochlea, the vestibule, a temporal bone, semicircular canals, the ampullae, and all the nerves that help make sound possible; but it does not seek attention, preferring instead to blend into the paper itself, out of sight, out of mind.

Canvas Two

Cobalt-cerulean eyes penetrate the page as the girl looks forward, daring, bold, the paint layered and defiant. A finger is pressed onto her watershed lips, a gesture

of silence. In place of deep and dark brown curls are seashells, a garland of brown homey hues, their curls and twirls reminders of childhood summers and ocean sounds and breezes. They, too, seek the comfort of the white canvas, but their size and number don't allow them the solitude they crave. They cannot hide; they are nature's amplifiers. Their hard surface invites sound to bounce within, the key to unlocking a whole new world for the girl.

Canvas Three

Soft brown curls take up the surface of the canvas, each guided by an invisible line as if laying out the foundations of a musical notebook ready for notation. The girl is almost invisible, her face and gaze turned away, barely defined against the colour of her hair. She appears demure, but her strength lies in letting the treble clef, the semiquaver, and crotchet dance along the page, swept by the curls of her hair. Their purple frames a symbol of power and independence, and they a symbol of movement, always going somewhere, shifting and changing, to create a more beautiful melody out of life.

With each brushstroke moving like the curve of an ear and with every daring concoction of colour, I feel my story come alive. I feel the love of my mother and the cold of winter on my skin.

I feel the dizzy spell in my head and the sound of yellow-crested cockatoos in my ears. I feel the unconditional love from my brother thrum in tune to my own heartbeat. I feel the warmth of hooked arms and the whisper of true friendship. I feel my mother stand beside me, and I reach for her hands, seeking safety and love, and as our hands clasp in promise that everything will be alright, I believe myself when I say: “*Ne brini, sve će biti ok.*”

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I am one of the 3.6 million Australians who suffer from some form of hearing loss: mild, moderate, severe, profound, or a combination of those. By 2060, this number is expected to rise to 7.8 million, largely due to Australia’s ageing population; more than three-quarters of Australians with hearing loss are aged sixty and over (Kiely and Anstey). However, hearing loss affects children and young people, too, with one out of every thousand diagnosed at birth. When I was born, Bosnia and Herzegovina was being ravaged by war. My mother gave birth, and I received little to no auditory neonatal care and support. Still, since the war ended in 1995, only certain cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina provide auditory neonatal care—Tuzla, Sarajevo and Livno—and in places like Tuzla, care was implemented in 2001 (Hasanbegovic and Mahmutovic; Mackey and Unlén). While in Australia the neonatal hearing screening was also

implemented in 2001, its reach was national and universal. All Australian states and territories have a program that aims to identify hearing loss in newborns by one month of age, refer babies with possible hearing loss for diagnostic testing at three months of age, and begin early intervention for babies with hearing loss by six months of age (Department of Health and Aged Care; NSW Health). All auditory screening tests require the consent of the parents.

If hearing loss is left undetected, children and young people may experience delays in speech, language development, literacy acquisition, and other forms of oral communication (Zussino et al.). But hearing loss can also be ‘hidden’ and therefore missed. When my kindergarten teacher picked up that I might have hearing loss, my mother immediately took me to an audiologist to complete an audiogram. I achieved a perfect score—and we went about our day and our lives. It wasn’t until we were back in Bosnia in 2005, on a holiday, that I took another hearing test and the audiologist this time confirmed that I did have some form of hearing loss. This was immediately retested and confirmed when we arrived back home in Australia. Hidden hearing loss is when an audiogram reflects normal hearing, but tests of speech reveal a deficit; as is in my case, the communication between the hair cells and the cochlea nerve is severed and the brain then receives incomplete messages. Overtime, of course, my audiogram results recognised this deficit, and I was diagnosed with mild-to-

moderate sensorineural hearing loss, which lasts for life and may get worse.

Hearing loss can also be acquired; it can happen later in one's life and is not congenital where it results from birth or soon after birth. Much like when hearing loss is not identified through early intervention, hearing loss later in life can create communication challenges for adults where many might avoid or be excluded from situations that require effortful listening. This can lead to increased risk of social isolation and low levels of social engagement, low rates of participation in the workforce and can affect mental wellbeing (McMahon et al.). In Australia, however, aged-related hearing loss is under reported. Of the 14.5% of Australians who suffer from hearing loss, very few seek help or see an audiologist or uptake hearing rehabilitation services (McMahon et al.; Community Affairs References Committee). Much of this reluctance stems from cultural beliefs and attitudes, from feelings of shame and embarrassment, from not knowing about the services available to support those hard of hearing, poor health literacy skills, and from the near invisible nature of the disability (Janes et al.; House of Representatives). Those with hearing loss who are most at disadvantage live in rural and regional areas, come from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, reside in residential aged care facilities, and come from areas of social disadvantage (Barr et al.).

It took me a very long time to come to terms with my hearing loss. It is not something people

see or talk about, and sometimes, it still feels foreign, too. At first, I only wore my hearing aids at home or during school exams or in situations that required desperate hearing. I could not fathom the idea of hearing aids being a support for me, designed to make my life easier by allowing me to communicate clearly with those around me, especially my friends. But in my mind in those very first few years, I felt that I was not enough, that I was lacking in intelligence, in worth, in my ability to be 'popular' with all my friends. An American study found that adults and children associate hearing aids with "decreased athleticism, confidence, health, leadership, and popularity" and those who wore glasses were also seen as being less athletic and popular but were still considered to be more intelligent, friendly, and successful (Qian). I do remember thinking once: *Why did it have to be my ears?*

Over time, I learnt to ignore those initial fears and came to realise that my hearing aids were not, in fact, designed to hurt me but to help me. But while I gained the confidence to wear them every day, I did not wear them without my hair down. The edges of the shard formed in my gut may have dulled with time, but it still remained. Writing this story was cathartic as it was frightening. I cried. I felt all the shame yet again. But only momentarily. I am here, writing my story. It's a huge step toward self-acceptance, toward healing.

I am hard of hearing.

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