

LAUREL NAKANISHI

The Silent Labyrinth

Redefining identity in the wake of hearing loss

ARTWORK BY REBECCA HUTCHINSON

THERE IS A PHOTO of me just at the moment: a faded black newsboy hat shades my face, leaving only a half moon of visible chin, perched on two open hands. Lying on my stomach, I've pinned the book open with my elbows: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. I wear a blue fleece jacket the color of a Muppet and yoga pants that are a little too bright. The ground around me is scattered with Doug fir cones and yellowing pine needles. Beside me, a stream throws itself over a little cliff, crashing and surging. The light is dusky—a Montana red-orange. Shoulders slumped into a wide U, head leaning in toward the page, I am oblivious to the camera. All I hear is the water falling.

I remember the sound of the water remaining in my left ear even after I turned away, pouring over itself, blocking out all other sounds. Later, I would tell my friends: "We were just hiking out of the backcountry. I could hear all day long; I felt fine." Then, suddenly, there was a waterfall in my ear. Hummingbird in my ear. Or I was deep undersea. I kept touching that left ear. It felt physically altered—dead in some way—even though I could feel the warm skin of it. We were unconcerned at first.

"Maybe you just have a lot of wax?" Alex suggested.

"Maybe a bug crawled in!" I joked.

But later that night, when I lay down to sleep, the whole world began to turn clockwise. When I stood again, it felt as if water were sloshing from one side of my head to the other, throwing me off balance. The four-mile hike to the trailhead began to seem impossibly far. I longed for nothing more than the inside

of a car and the comforting buzz of hospital fluorescence.

The next morning, Alex plied me with granola bars and almonds, but the vertigo made me too nauseous to eat. We strapped on our backpacks and slowly crept across the stream on a notched log bridge. The first part of the trail was cut into shale and perched over a cliff. Landslides had made the terrain narrow and unstable. I was dizzy and slow, clinging to my walking sticks as we began the hike. I tried not to look down at the treetops and broad lake below. The world spun, I spun, the forest was too quiet. I planted one foot in front of the next. Alex kept on edging out to the cliffy side of the trail, as if to catch me when I lost my balance.

"You're going to fall," I said, imagining his heavy backpack tipping him over the precipice. For once, it seemed that Alex, my forever-unruffled Alex, felt more worry than I. The spinning had removed me—I experienced the day from somewhere deep and far away.

Alex drew back and grasped a loop on my pack. We both observed my slow steps. Late season huckleberries blackening on their stalks, the dark green lobes of kinnikinnick, tamaracks shuffling off their yellow needles—everything was vibrant and surreal. My good ear picked up the hard edges of sound: shrill robin's cheep, crackle of the plastic snack bag, the unceasing rustle of wind through leaves. When we finally reached the trailhead and called my parents and drove into town, I thought this otherworldly feeling would subside. But it followed, turning everything silent and strange.



I HAVE ONLY been really drunk once in my life. It was a night in Japan: Ozeki One Cup sake, then spiked shushies, then karaoke, then an empty, early morning street. Stumbling home in the predawn, I passed a man, his back turned to the waist-high bushes. Nearing, I saw that he was either peeing or jerking off. I didn't stop to check but ran down the hill, under the bridge, past the farmers' market. Stop signs, fence posts, and mailboxes all seemed to seep away from their forms, the colors running each into the next. I couldn't seem to focus on any one thing. The world spun when I stopped for breath—shifting and reconfiguring, even as I stood still, gazing into my little apartment.

BACK HOME at sea level, nothing has changed.

"I feel like I'm drunk," I tell my friends when they ask how I am.

It's not funny really, but we laugh. And I think: if only I could lie down again on those tatami mats and sleep the strangeness away.

I HAVE BEEN diagnosed with "sudden hearing loss," a condition that is just what it sounds like. Suddenly, one day, my left ear went silent. It could have happened over the course of hours, or from one second to the next—gone. The ENT doctor is honest but unhelpful: "We don't really know what causes it. We don't know how to cure it. Sometimes it just gets better on its own." I spend a total of fifteen minutes with Dr. ENT. He peers into my ears, nose, and throat. He listens to the brief story of my backpacking trip. And then he sends me to a lab where a woman plays a series of ooohs and ahhs that buzz against my bad ear. I raise my hand randomly, desperately, willing myself to hear something.

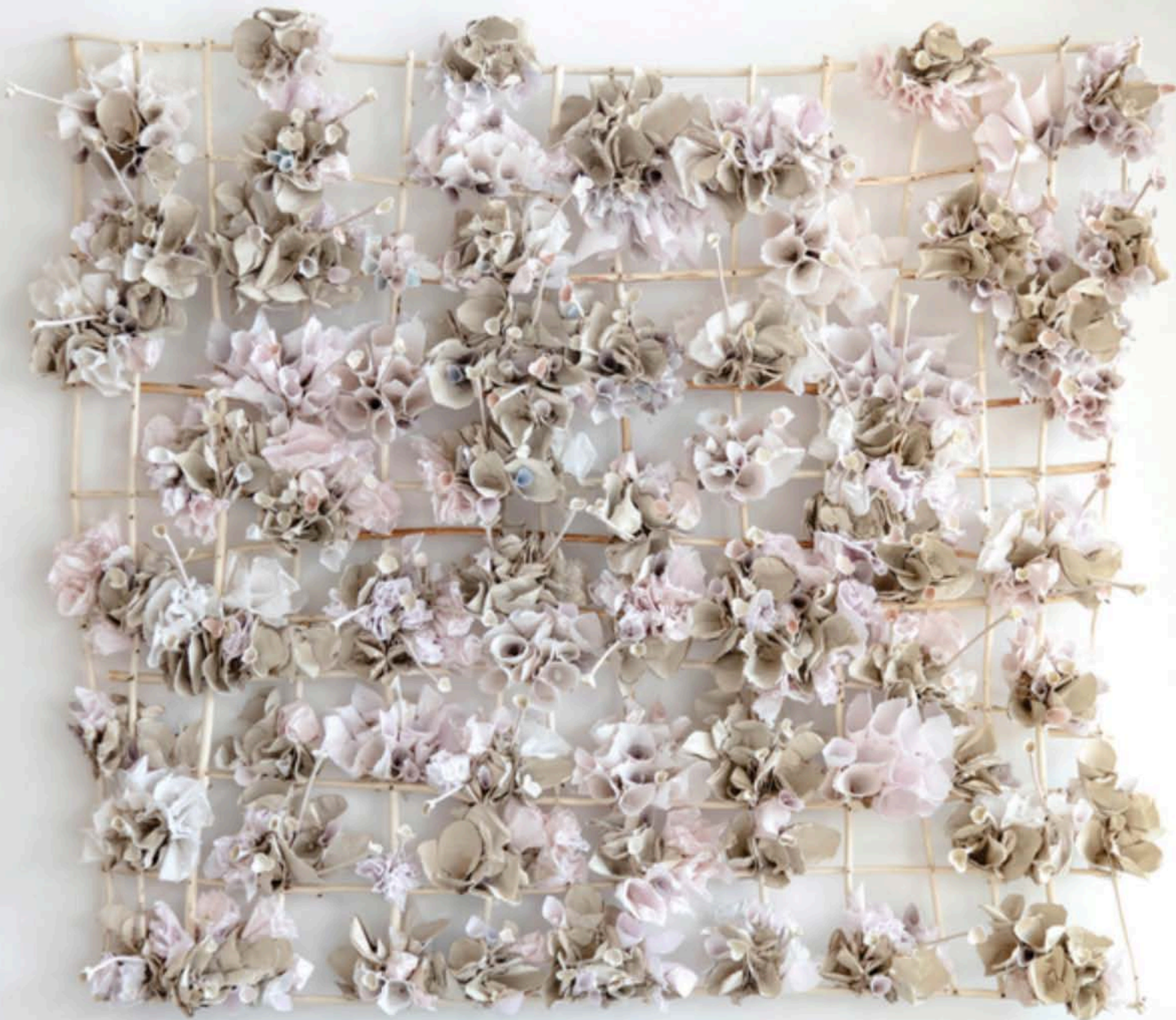
Back in his office, Dr. ENT gives me a prescription for steroids. "To be honest, steroids are what doctors give patients when they're unsure of what else to do," he says. "But you have to know, you might lose the ear."

Will it fall off? I wonder, before realizing that he is saying that I may lose my hearing altogether. I feel a cold flush move from my chest out to my arms. The rest of his words seem to come from the end of a long tunnel. The test results are dismal: legally deaf, no word recognition, no passive response.

"I'm sorry," says Dr. ENT. This is my cue to leave.

Distending Pink, 2018, fired and unfired porcelain paper clay, hand-made paper, organic material, 6 x 8 x 1.5 feet. (Details of this artwork are shown on the previous and following pages.)

REPRESENTED BY DUANE REED GALLERY



WEEKS PASS. I take the full course of steroids and some antibiotics, but the hearing in my left ear does not return. I begin to nurse a secret fear: What if I go deaf in my right ear too? What if the sound I just heard was the last sound I'll ever hear?

When the forgetting disease hits Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Aureliano peppers his house with notes to remind him of who and what everything is: "This is the cow. She needs to be milked every morning . . ." I have begun a similar process.

Sound: Door closing

It happens in two sequential noises: first the bump of the metal tab against the doorframe, except it doesn't sound like metal, but wood; then the larger thud of the door on the frame and that tongue-like tab of the knob, sliding into its snug, unyielding little cave.

Sound: Ocean

It is the *shu-shu* of a mother hushing her baby. No . . . more like a secret-concealing "Shhh—" uttered at the brink of disclosure. A secret that backed away into silence. "Shhh," soothed, tossed, smoothed against the sand. Lulling, rhythmic, the Atlantic's shallow song to the shore. But what do you do when the ocean rises up and floods your ear?

FOR A FEW MOMENTS each day, I let the fear flood in with all its panicky questions. If my hearing can disappear so suddenly,

what else could I lose? I had always thought that I could control my body. I eat well. I exercise. I meditate. I do everything right. But now my ear, or me in the form of ear, has revealed its own rebellious mystery. Tubes and loops, seashell and drum, hammer and anvil, round and oval windows—the inner ear seems too intricate to function. Crystals, tiny hairs, echoes across water—it is so fragile and precarious. Who thought up this system? How do we hear at all? My body that I thought was so solid, so me, feels like a collection of riddles. This world that I thought was real shifts with my shifting senses.

When Alex comes home from work, I embrace him. His body feels solid, an anchor for my fuzzy head. I'm dizzy when I stand. The world spins when I lie down. I remember a carnival ride from when I was a kid, the Twirling Strawberry—a huge plastic strawberry carriage turning circles within circles. I imagine I am back there, my brother turning the wheel hard to make us spin faster and faster. I am thrilled. I beg him to stop.

ACCORDING TO Chinese medicine, the kidneys support hearing and allow the ears to function. They also are the home of anxiety and fear. I don't think of myself as a particularly fearful person, but when the acupuncturist presses his thumb to my wrist and asks, "Have you had any strong emotions lately?" I think about those days in the backcountry right before I was struck deaf.

That first afternoon in the backcountry, we were up high and I heard a constant low roar that I thought was airplanes passing overhead, but was actually wind pushing through the ridges.

Up there the bones of the mountains showed themselves. A white strut angled right to the shore. We thought about setting camp, but the wind blew us into the forest.

The next morning, as we hiked along a narrow cusp of land above the lake, we found bear prints. The trail had dried down to a dust that yielded easily to her paw. I brought my own finger close, tracing the triangular pad, the five-finger dents crowned each with gouges: her claws. Her print was larger than my outstretched hand, but only just. Was it a grizzly? We followed her prints into a high basin that cupped an oval of water. On my hip swung a holster of bear spray. I imagined her at every twist in the trail: sitting up, ears perked, nosing the air between us, or crouching in the huckleberries, her cinnamon back just visible among the trunks of Doug fir and tamarack. I called out to her too often, grating the smoky air against my vocal cords. Always our voices were like envoys, traveling out through the ravines and basins and blushing adret. I shouted until my words turned harsh and rough and far away from the wonder I really did feel below the fear.

That afternoon I felt it in my chest, just beneath my sternum: a burning, tightening sensation that triggered jolts of adrenaline. The fear made me want to run or shout, but instead I drank too much water. I listened for the rustle of leaves: a large body in the undergrowth. I listened for a huff: her warning, remembering the news story. Just before we left for Montana, a man in Yellowstone was killed. I wanted to write it off as some stupid tourist trying to feed the bears, but he wasn't. He had been an experienced outdoorsman. He was hiking in the backcountry, like us, and a mother grizzly attacked him. They found his body days later, half eaten and half buried.

That night, I woke to footsteps right next to our tent. Each of my senses piqued and tingled. I listened as the steps came closer—heavy against the packed dirt of the trail. Twigs snapped. Something snuffled. In a moment, I recognized the sound as a deer. It sniffed around our camp and clomped off, but I lay for hours in that sudden fear. Now I am haunted by questions: Could I have caused this? Did I poison my body with fear? Is it my fault after all?

I AM DEAF. Not deaf. But my left ear sings with a music of its own. Or is it wailing? Or am I now attuned to higher frequencies—the atmosphere, calling?

This morning Alex shouts into my left ear: "Hello!"

Then: "I love you!"

Then a whisper: "The ocean is everywhere."

I hear it ricochet through my head and pick it up with my good ear.

Sound: MRI machine

A sound like the industrial revolution. From the depths, a prologue of beats, like two almost-synchronized drummers, "pack-pack" of mallet on bamboo branch, twice, faster. Then the whole machine buzzes, a low, mechanical malice. It will never end. Then it ends: high whine, another low whimper, and silence.

Sound: conversations overheard

Bubble, like a stream running against that smooth same rock. Sometimes one voice rises above the rest. And you wouldn't think that Cuban kid going on about selfies and makeup would ever be a thing to miss. But there is so much humanity: "Ven pa'ca. Let me see your eyes pa' pintarlo."

Who knew that the body could die in stages, in small deaths? What else is death than silence?

Sound: Alex's voice

A little monotone, mid-register, pausing after every couple of words when he is trying to say something important. It sounds like Sunday afternoon, like sand tracked through the house and salt crystals dried on my eyelashes. Slow, like blood slows in the sun. His voice—the air of that afternoon, thick in my throat. His voice, remember, like the afternoon's burnished light.

I DO NOT TELL anyone about these notes—it seems too dramatic, too fearful, and I want, more than anything, to be brave. In the silence of my days, my values seem to be reordering themselves. What is it most important to remember? In *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the entrance of the town is marked with a sign that says MACONDO, and in the main street, another: GOD EXISTS.

WHO KNEW that the body could die in stages, in small deaths? What else is death than silence? Silence, which is a part of the body breaking down, not responding. If my left ear has become a doorway to death, then what lies beyond?

I REMEMBER our last afternoon in the backcountry. It was quiet, save for the squirrel's rattle, save for that wind turning up glittering swaths of lake skin. A Steller's jay beat her wings, and then I heard the call of that bird—that gray-bodied, white-headed bird we had seen on the trail the first day. It had followed us from tree to tree, as if in welcome.

