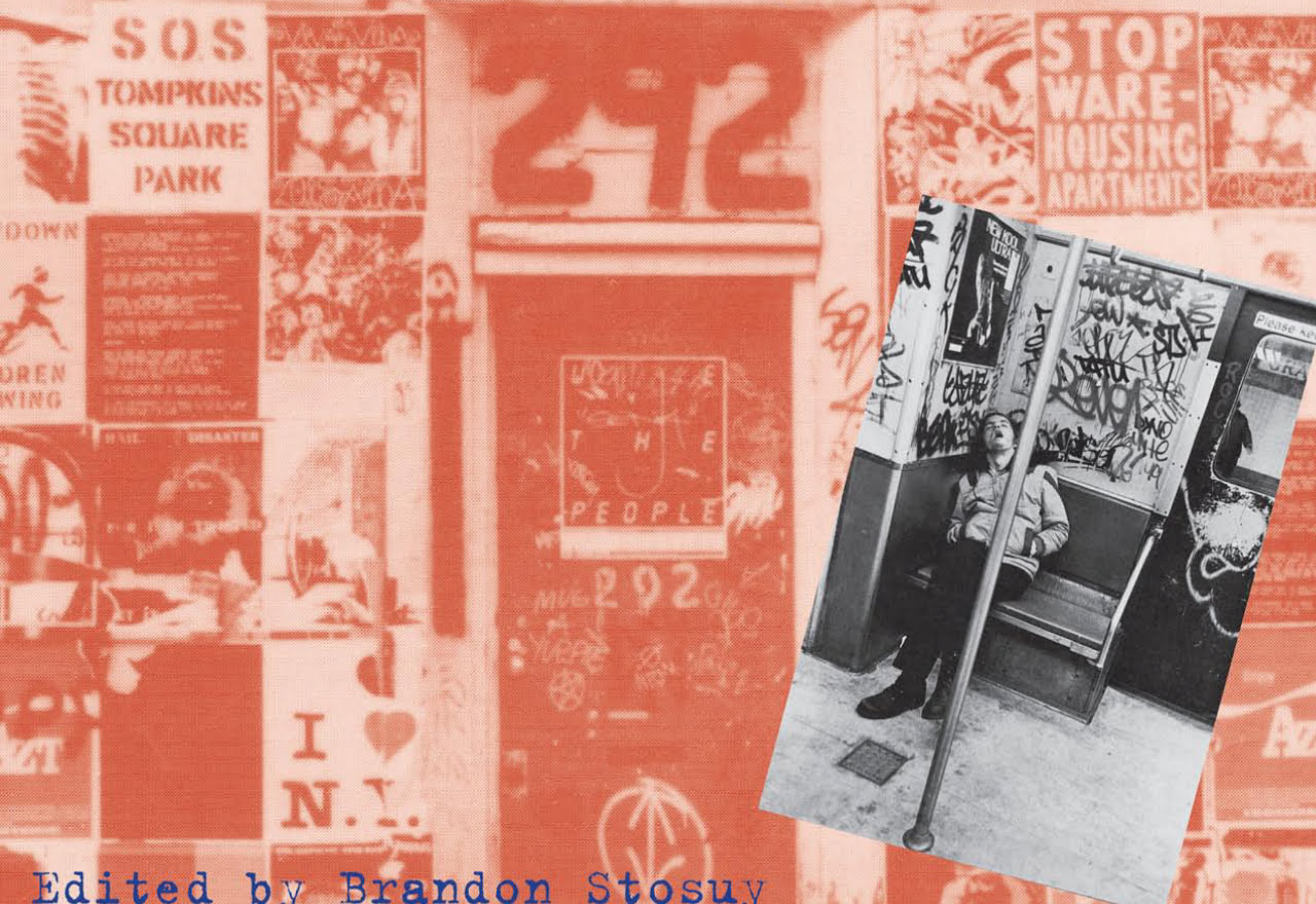


UP IS UP

New York's Downtown Literary Scene, 1974-1992



Edited by Brandon Stosuy

Afterword by Dennis Cooper and Eileen Myles

BUT SO IS DOWN

WORDS IN REVERSE (1979)

LAURIE ANDERSON

The following texts are extracts from “Like A Stream” (1978)—a piece for string ensemble, tape bow Instruments, and voice—and “Americans On The Move” (1979)—an extended series for voice, electronics, film, and instruments.

It was the night flight from Houston—almost perfect visibility. You could see the lights from all the little Texas towns far below. I was sitting next to a fifty-two year old woman who had never been on a plane before. Her son had sent her a ticket and said, “Mom, you’ve raised ten kids, it’s time you got on a plane.” She was sitting in the window seat, staring out. She kept talking about the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper and pointing. Suddenly I realized she thought we were in Outer Space, looking down at the stars. I said, “You know, I think those lights down there are the lights from little towns.”

I saw a photograph of Tesla who invented the Tesla Coil. He also invented a pair of shoes with soles four inches thick to ground him while he worked in the laboratory. In the picture, Tesla was sitting in his lab, wearing the shoes, and reading a book by the light of the long streamer-like sparks shooting out of his transformers.

I went to the movies and I saw a dog thirty feet high. And this dog was made entirely of light. And he filled up the whole screen. And his eyes were long hallways. He had those long, echoing, hallway eyes.

He thought of space that way . . . as something you could fall into . . . Falling for miles . . . sideways.

I met a man in Canada and every day he had the same thing for lunch. He had a carrot and he had a bowl of chocolate pudding. First he ate the carrot into the shape of a spoon. Then he ate the pudding with the carrot shaped spoon. And then he ate the carrot.

There are Eskimos who live above the timber line. There's no wood there for the runners of their sleds. So instead, they use long frozen fish, which they strap to the bottoms of their sleds to slip across the snow.

I saw a man on the Bowery and he was wearing ancient, greasy clothes and brand new bright white socks . . . and no shoes. Instead, he was standing on two small pieces of plywood and as he moved along the block, he bent down, moved one of the pieces slightly ahead and stepped on it. Then he moved the other piece slightly ahead and stepped on it.

You're walking . . . and you don't always realize it but you're always falling. With each step . . . you fall. You fall forward a short way and then catch yourself. Over and over . . . you are falling . . . and then catch yourself. You keep falling and catching yourself falling. And this is how you are walking and falling at the same time.

It was the Fourth of July and a parade of ships from all over the world sailed slowly by. Each was "camouflaged" by a particular shade of blue, gray, blue-gray or gray-blue. Bright blue for Greece, pale blue for Portugal, silver-gray with white trim for France, steel-gray for the United States. Strictly local colors. Regional ideas about the ocean. No one could have sneak-attacked anywhere but off their own coasts. This is the trouble with the transparency of water.

It was a room full of people. They had all arrived at the same building at approximately the same time. They were all free and they were all asking themselves the same question: **What is behind that curtain?**

(Peter says the thing he likes best about bowling is that you can see exactly what shoe sizes people wear.)

Outside the theater showing the Jane Fonda movie, the lights are bright. The movie is over and the crowd moves slowly out the glass doors. Most of the moviegoers are squinting, temporarily disoriented by three-dimensional space. All told, about seventy Jane Fondas stride through the doors—heads set at jaunty new angles, wise-cracking over their shoulders, brand new memories. Even the short-legged have new, jive, long ones. This is one of the effects of light.

No one has ever looked at me like this for so long. No one has ever **stared** at me like this for such a long time. This is the first time anyone has ever looked at me like this, **stared** at me like this for such a long time . . . for so long . . . for such a long time. . . .

Dan said he was on a plane flying over Greenland with a bunch of Texans. And they had binoculars. They were looking for polar bears down on the ice. White bears down on the white ice. From approximately 10,000 feet. And they said, “Look! I think I see one now! Down there . . . I think I see one down there. Maybe that’s one right there! Well, it **could** be one. . . .”

Oh. Oh. I like the way you look. Oh. Oh. Oh. I like the way you talk. Oh. I like the way you walk. But most of all I like the way you look (at me).

In my dream, I am your customer.

He didn't know **what** to do. So he decided to watch the government, and see what the government was doing, and then kind of scale it down to size and run his life that way.

It was an ancient Japanese pot, incised with grooves. Thin-ridged grooves. Grooves all around it. It looked like one of those collapsible paper lanterns. It was an experiment. The pot was placed on a turntable and the turntable began to revolve. A needle was set into the groove. A stereo needle. They were waiting to hear the voice of the potter potting the pot 2,000 years ago. They were hoping the sounds of the potter had somehow been embedded into the wet clay. And stayed there, intact, clinging to the ridges of the clay. The pot turned around and around, like a record being treadled into the third dimension. It turned. They listened. They were listening. Some of them heard an unidentifiable Japanese dialect, rapid and high. Some of them heard high-pitched static. The needle dug into the pot. The needle was getting blunt. More and more blunt. It was that scientific. Blunter and scientific. More blunt . . . and more scientific.

I can draw you so that you have no ears. I can draw you so that you have no ears at all. So that where your ears would be, there is only blank paper.

Looking into his eyes was like walking into a large municipal building. He had perfected an arrangement of his features that suggested International Style architecture: a subtle yet daring blend of American industry's most durable yet flexible materials. His expression seemed to suggest he had just finished saying, "That's the way things will be in the year 2,000."

A certain American sect has completed its research on the patterns of winds, tides, and currents during the Flood. According to their calculations, during the Flood, the winds, tides, and currents were in an overall southeasterly direction. This would then mean that in order for the Ark to have landed on Mount Ararat, it would have had to have started out several thousand miles to the west. This would then locate pre-Flood history somewhere in the area of Upstate New York, and the Garden of Eden roughly in Genesee County.

I am in my body the way most people drive in their cars.

I went to a palm reader and the odd thing about the reading was that everything she told me was totally wrong. But she seemed so sure of the information that I began to feel like I'd been walking around with these false documents permanently tattooed to my hands. It was very noisy in the parlor and members of her family kept running in and out. They were speaking a high, clicking kind of language that sounded a lot like Arabic. Books and magazines in Arabic were strewn all over the floor. It suddenly occurred to me that maybe there was a translation problem—that maybe she was reading my hand from right to left instead of left to right. Thinking of mirrors, I gave her my other hand. Then she put her hand out and we sat there for several minutes in what I assumed was some sort of participatory ritual. Finally I realized that her hand was out because she was waiting for money.

A couple of weeks ago, an earthquake was reported in parts of the Bronx and New Jersey. The quake measured roughly 3.5 on the Richter scale and its epicenter was pinpointed to an ancient New Jersey bog. It was the first quake of this magnitude in the area since 1927. The scientists at nearby Princeton, however, missed the quake. They said, “At the time of the earthquake, we were changing our chart paper.”

You know, you look a lot like a car. From a distance, say, from a few blocks away, you look exactly like a car. You look like a car from a distance.

The detective novel is the only type of novel truly invented in the twentieth century. In the detective novel, the hero is dead in the very beginning. So you don't have to deal with human nature at all. . . . Only the slow accumulation of facts—of data. You must put the hero together yourself.

In science fiction novels, the hero just flies in at the very beginning. Nothing is explained. He can forge steel with his bare hands. He can walk in zero gravity. And they say, “Look! He can walk in zero gravity!” So you don't have to deal with human nature at all.

I wanted you. . . . And I was looking for you. . . . But I couldn't find you. I wanted you. . . . And I was looking for you all day. . . . But I couldn't find you. . . . I couldn't find you. . . .

He explained his career in filmmaking this way—his mother had always had a hobby of cutting out pictures of hamsters from magazines. She would make frames for the photographs by gluing the wood chips from the bottoms of hamster cages into rectangles. She hung these over the fireplace, which was how he got the Idea for using light.

Dad said last spring there were a lot of geese in his wheat field. The geese grew and the wheat grew; the geese grew and the wheat kept growing. But the geese always grew just slightly faster than the wheat. And all you could see were their long necks waving above the fields of grain. And he said, “Look! They look like cobras out there in that wheat field.”

If you can't talk about it, point to it.

Last night I dreamed I was lying in bed sleeping. Last night I dreamed all night that I was just lying in bed dreaming I was sleeping. Last night I dreamed I was sleeping.

When Bobby got back from his first trip to Las Vegas, he said he noticed he was pausing just a little longer than usual after putting his money into parking meters and xerox machines.

I met a writer at a cocktail party. This writer used “I” in all his books. He was famous for the way he used “I” in all the books he wrote. At the party, people kept coming up to him and saying, “Gee! I really like your work!” And he kept saying, “Thanks, but I’m not very representative of myself.”

I read about a rabbit in a laboratory. The experimenters held the rabbit’s head, eyes open, pointed towards an open window. For twenty minutes, staring at the bright window. Then they took a knife and cut the rabbit’s head off, peeled the tissue off its eyes, dyed it, and under the microscope, like film, the tissue developed. There were two windows imprinted on the rabbit’s eyes. And they said, “Look! This rabbit has windows on its eyes!”

The reason you always think there are fires at riots is because that’s the only place at the scene of the riot where there is enough light for the video camera. Actually, maybe this fire is only something happening **near** the riot . . . incidental to the riot. Someone’s trash is on fire or someone is having a barbeque near the riot but not as **part** of the riot. But that’s why you think there are always fires at riots when sometimes there aren’t any fires at riots, or in any case, not at every riot.

Steven Weed wrote in his autobiography that he was asked by the FBI to come in and answer a few questions. He said It wasn’t like an interrogation room at all—there were no bright lights. . . . But he said they had it set up so that there was an agent on his right and an agent on his left and they alternated questions so that he had to keep turning his head back and forth, back and forth, to answer them. He said that after a few hours of doing this, he realized that no matter what answer he gave, It always looked like “no” . . . “no” . . . “no.” . . .

From “IT Song”—A song for a man and a woman who can’t agree on what the word “it” refers to

She said: It looks. Don’t you think it looks a lot like rain?

He said: Isn’t it . . . isn’t it just like a woman?

She said: It’s hard. It’s just kind of hard to say.

He said: Isn’t it just . . . isn’t it just like a woman?

She said: It goes. That’s the way it goes. It goes that way.

He said: Isn’t it just . . . just like a woman?

She said: It takes. It takes one. It takes one to know one.

He said: Isn’t it just like . . . just like a woman?

She said: It takes one. It takes one, two. It takes one to know one.

She said it. She said it to know. She said it to no one.

Isn’t it, isn’t it just, isn’t it just like a woman?

From “Closed Circuits”—A Song for Voice, Microphone Boom, and Electronics

Well I know who you are baby. I’ve seen you go into that meditative state. You’re the snake charmer, baby. And you’re also the snake. You’re a closed circuit baby. You’ve got the answers in the palms of your hands.

Well, I met a blind judge and he said, “I know who you are,” and I said, “Who?” And he said, “You’re a closed circuit, baby.” He said, “You know the world is divided into two kinds of things. There’s luck . . . and there’s the law. There’s a knock on wood that says ‘it might’ and there’s the long arm of the law that says ‘it’s right.’ And it’s a tricky balancing act between the two because **both** are equally true. Cause might makes right and anything could happen, que sera sera . . . am I right?”

Well, I saw a couple of hula dancers hula-ing down the street and they were saying, “I wonder which way the tide’s gonna roll in tonight?” And I said, “Hold up hula dancers! You know the tide’s gonna roll in . . . then it’s gonna roll right out again. Cause it’s a closed circuit baby. We’ve got rules for that kind of thing and the moon is so bright tonight.”

And don’t think I haven’t seen all those blind Arabs around. I’ve seen ‘em around! And I’ve watched them charm that oil right out of the ground. Long black streams of that dark, electric light. And they said, “One day the sun went down and it went way down . . . into the ground. Three thousand years go by . . . and we pump it right back up again. Cause it’s a closed circuit baby. We can change the dark into the light . . . and vice versa.”

Well I know who you are, baby. I've watched you count yourself to sleep. You're the shepherd, baby. And you're also 1-2-3-hundred sheep. I've watched you fall asleep.

In one of the spacecraft we sent to Jupiter, there were two identical computers—one active and the other quiescent, “asleep,” a fail-safe back-up. For some unknown reason, NASA engineers had left out one program. They hadn't told the computers that at blast-off there would be a temporary adjustment period. At the moment of lift-off, the first computer began to get strange read-outs. Nothing seemed to calibrate. What should have read zero read 2,000 and vice versa. Whole systems went out. The computer began to troubleshoot, scanning all systems. “. . . Inoperative . . . Inoperative . . . Inoperative. . .” It concluded that since **all** systems seemed inoperative, the computer itself was defective. It woke up the second computer which in turn scanned the craft. “. . . Inoperative . . . Inoperative. . .” It concluded that it **too** was non-functional and that the spacecraft would have to return to earth.

In Houston, programmers suddenly realized the omission. The new message flashed off, brief, simplified by emergency. **#1—Reactivate . . . #2—Resume quiescence . . . Now: Shock; . . . Now: Illusory, temporary inoperative state. . . Now: Birth.**

It was that way for him. Some days he was flying. Flying easily. White light. Great ideas. He could do no wrong. And then one day, it would all leave him. For no reason, it left and suddenly nothing worked. He burned the toast. Dented the car. He was clumsy. Depressed. And then it would change again. It would be easy again. It changed fast and for no reason, it changed. And he went to the doctor and the doctor said, “. . . chemical imbalance . . .” and gave him some chemicals and cured him. Cured him until it was all evened out—every day same thing. And he was so relieved to find out that “he” wasn't crazy. “It's not me . . . it's my biochemistry. . . .”

When TV signals are sent out, they don't stop. They keep going. They pick up speed as they leave the solar system. By now, the first TV programs ever made have been traveling for thirty years. They are well beyond our solar system now. All those characters from cowboy serials, variety hours, and quiz shows are sailing out. They are the first true voyagers into deep space. And they sail farther and farther, intact, still talking.

And as we listen with our instruments, as we learn to listen farther and farther into space, we can hear them. We listen farther and that is what we hear. They are jamming the lines. We listen and we hear them talking, traveling faster and faster, getting fainter and fainter. And as our instruments get more sophisticated we can hear them better . . . speeding away . . . the sound of speeding away . . . like a phone continuously ringing.