

THE FIRST TIME

I spoke in tongues when I was eight years old. It wasn't something I especially wanted to do. I had been taken into a charismatic religious meeting by my grandmother; it was clear from her intimations and behavior that she wanted nothing more than for me to take Jesus as my personal savior. I was playing for time when I walked to the front of the meeting, where those who wanted to take the next step were invited to receive personal prayers and blessings. Part of me felt like I could use some blessings, and part of me just wanted to make my grandmother happy.

I was shocked when, coaxed by the soft voice of the preacher's wife, who had knelt next to me and put her arm around me to pray with me, I found myself falling into a separate part of reality. There was a gate. I didn't see it so much as feel it. The metal radiated enough cold to give me goosebumps. Cast iron curlicues rose to great heights. A buzzing filled my ears. I could hear nothing around me, not the preacher's wife, nor the other churchgoers' exclamations. I just felt the presence of the gate. Its great big doors yawned open in front of me, and a vast nothingness hung there. I stepped into it.

I stayed in trance, speaking continuously, for over four hours. At first, I could hear myself a little: I thought I was speaking Latin. Then my voice became distant and strange. Gradually, I lost ordinary consciousness and couldn't tell how I sounded anymore. I lost my sense of time. It felt amazing. I was gigantic—I was part of God, and God was part of me, and time itself flowed in any direction I wanted. I could go backwards and speak ancient forgotten tongues, and I could travel in space and converse with angels. I almost came out of the ecstatic state at least once and remember exerting willpower to go back in. I didn't want it

to end. Looking back now, I think that partly I didn't want to deal with my grandmother and her religious friends and what they would expect of me, now that I had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. In playing for time, I painted myself into a corner; the longer I babbled, the more clearly my grandmother's side won.

That evening and in the following days, my grandmother explained my new religious responsibilities. I was supposed to testify to my schoolmates, save my parents, and join a congregation in my hometown. Above all, I needed to keep strong my relationship with God, read the Bible, pray, and seek more charismatic experiences. I had been given a priceless gift, and I was not to squander it.

I failed to do any of this. My parents wanted nothing to do with charismatic religiosity, and I certainly didn't need to become any less popular at school. I answered my grandmother's questions more and more vaguely, and pretended to read the books she sent. I lost my emotional connection with her. I became a liar. My religious experience became a shameful secret. I hated all religions for a long time.

THE SECOND TIME

You don't experience vast ecstasy once as a child and never wonder about it again. I've spent a lifetime seeking it, in various somatic and chemical forms. That feeling of oneness with something enormous was real, undeniable. And my brain was able to create it out of its own chemicals! The closest I have been able to get since is the feeling of flow I sometimes have while writing.

That led me, after some tangents, to where I am now: at an arts university, chasing ecstasy, chasing something to say that might be bigger than myself.

It's with some dismay that in this environment I occasionally notice a scene not unlike the 1980s evangelical revival meeting I experienced in a small Finnish town. There are bewildered students, of course, and equally bewildered professors who nevertheless hold positions of ministry in this congregation. They have chosen us. They must now

guide us. In many cases, they also hold positions of power over how this is all going to turn out for us. Shaking slightly, we take short steps as we are called to the altar. We are blessed, prayed on. We are to channel the Spirit of Art in order—and this has been said without irony—to save the world.

I have attended meetings with serious adults discussing the future of doctoral-level artistic research in Finland, some of whom seemed to understand the arts university as something separate from "the world." It wasn't said out loud, but I insist I heard it: above. We are above the mundane concerns of politics, science, law, and numbness-inducing ordinariness. From this exalted perspective, it is the students' role to not only scramble together careers with ever-dwindling resources; we must also correct everything that has gone wrong in every specialized field of knowledge, on every rung of society, in local, national, planetary—perhaps cosmic—existence. That is the mandate given to us by a few people who decided that it's their job to determine such matters. They are looking over our shoulders, urging us to speak the holy words correctly so that their prophecy can be fulfilled.

It is perhaps not so strange that in this situation I decided to try speaking in tongues again.

I started my now almost year-long artistic study of non-religious glossolalia partly out of protest and partly out of curiosity. When I feel pressured, I usually look for a way out. As a child, I found an escape from the religious meeting through my own brain chemistry. I wanted to know if that escape was still there. I was also curious about what such poetry could say to me today. In the middle of joyless sanctimony and increasingly dire global circumstances, I wondered what it would mean to touch again the joyous aspect of pure flow, free of sacred purpose and religious baggage, free of any need to perform, just to see how it is to try to hold off meaning as long as I can.

Glossolalia means the practice of vocalizing a stream of sounds that resist denotation (Harkness, 2021, 2). It is a combination of the Greek words *glossa* (languages) and *lalein* (talk). The practice is older than Christianity and has

been found in cultures around the world (May 1956). The body and voice are its central tools. Breath, sound, rhythm, tone, tempo, vocal range, and movement create forms that can be likened to experimental poetry or sound art. It is typically a communal practice, an act of linguistic anarchy that invites others in but offers no guarantees of meaning-based consensus.

Glossolalia poses a challenge to algorithmic systems designed to parse meaning from human speech. Algorithms depend on patterns, coherence, and the ability to link sounds with known words. Glossolalia disrupts this entirely. It doesn't fit into the categories or models of recognizable speech; it is "noise" to the algorithm and thus becomes something unclassifiable—*anti-information*.

These days I practice alone, but I plan to perform in the future. I would like for others to join me, to create a magnificent cacophony of voices void of meaning, both impersonal and deeply intimate, both iconoclastic and holy.

My main goal now is simple: to be surprised by what syllable comes out of my mouth next. Being baffled was one of the joyous aspects of my childhood glossolalia experience. It also seems to touch something essential. I want to fall toward something, as it were, and observe the features of my falling more and more closely so that the thing I am collapsing toward, which can never in the end be experienced, can begin to echo in me.

Through my exercises, I've become fascinated by the versatility and surprises in glossolalia. The experience can be maddening, uncomfortable, or numbing, but at times, it's also deeply moving. I've begun to see my glossolalia exercises as a way to deconstruct how meaning is formed. A karaoke device inherited from my father has proven surprisingly helpful; by amplifying my voice and adding echo, I create an effect that feels so alien it becomes easier to immerse myself fully in the experience. I record some of these sessions and review them later. Occasionally, I use a "source text" and attempt to "translate" it into glossolalia.

Slowing down my speech allows me to make more detailed observations, though it brings the risk of anticipating my own next move. I find intra-syllable variation

helps counter this. For example, I might focus on starting a syllable with an unusual sound, letting the nucleus and rest of the syllable follow more spontaneously. Even if the rest are ordinary Finnish vowels, the initial unusual sound puts the entire syllable in a strange light. I also work on producing phonemes that don't exist in any of the languages I speak, incorporating them into my glossolalia. Examples include hissing, friction, and tongue-smacking sounds—what phoneticians refer to as sibilants, fricatives, and clicks—as well as sounds formed by unusual tongue positions. For instance, by rolling my tongue while producing a vowel, I create a unique approximant, with a front vowel that sounds somewhere between "y" and "ö." I try to expand the range of sounds I can draw upon in spontaneous glossolalia. The more options I have, the more often I believe I can surprise myself.

SOME EXPERIMENTS TO TRY

I sometimes dream nonsensical words and phrases. Whenever I remember, I write them down. It doesn't feel like they come from me. It seems, rather, that language is dreaming me. Language reaches into the depths of nothingness, pulls me and everything else out, and throws us into existence like marbles skittering across a tilted floor.

I have used some of my dream words here to begin developing a glossary for the practice of artistic glossolalia. These techniques can be used quietly or loudly, alone or together, privately or in a public space. One doesn't need to feel anything special. The language will probably not flow freely at first. The key is to accept whatever comes; however it comes.

It might be interesting to interrupt a discussion of religious-conservative politicians with outrageously queer glossolalia. Or to comment in ecstatic utterances when a university administrator expounds on students' world-saving capacities, which happen to fit astonishingly well with the type of publicity needed for everyone's career-saving gambits. Or to do a session together with collaborators before a meeting, event or rehearsal.

When I was an immigrant in America, I sometimes spoke nonsense words to my English-speaking partner and step-son. I felt wrapped in linguistic bubble wrap by my second language, and often pure babble seemed more present, closer to the source.

TEKELEK

Make *simple speech and sounds that prepare you for glossolalia*: repeat the same word, make variations on a rhyming poem or song fragment. Use some real sentences and repeat them until they begin to twist and mutate. Prepare for unwriting by loosening the grip of language.

You can try messing with this quote from Jean-Luc Nancy:

Dans le temps de cette attaque, avant le son proprement dit, il y a le frottement de la battue, entre dehors et dedans, dans le pli dépli d'une danse ébauchée. Il y a la levée d'un corps, l'espacement et la configuration mobile d'un sujet, ce qui revient à dire, identiquement, la possibilité et la nécessité de la resonance.

(Nancy 2002, 75).

In the time of this attack, before sound per se, there is the friction of the thing beaten, between outside and inside, in the fold and unfold of the beginning of a dance. There is the release of a body, the spacing and mobile configuration of a subject, which comes down to saying, identically, the possibility and necessity of resonance.

(Nancy 2007, 39).

HOMMAGEM

Move with intent to let go—*rock, tap your hands and feet, sway*. Let go of looking artistic, reasonable, purposeful or knowledgeable. Be like a small child, or a stomping animal.

Begin to make noises as part of movement: loud breaths, grunts, shrieks. Be movement and noise.

JEENOOSHII

Decorate your breath. Make it jagged, make it smooth. Make it slippery, soft, raspy, loud, round, flat, jumpy, leafy, humming, vowelly, or consonanty. Try to see how many kinds of breath can happen in one out-breath, and then in the next in-breath. How is breathing? What is breathing? Who can you become in one breath?

NAUM

Notice when you begin to *slide from preparation towards the trance*. Know that this is a dance. Glide back and forth. You don't need to be in a trance to practice glossolalia, but you might need trance skills for something else, so it's good to get to know them. Practice control so you are never mistaken that the holy state is yours to enter and exit as you wish. No group, no god, no authority, or teacher can make a claim on your ecstasy.

OEFUMSTRA

Use an internal image to support your practice of glossolalia, for example, a landscape, an animal, a person, object, or deity. Try different ones to see how they affect you. Then allow them to dissolve completely. They were just the wrapping paper around nothingness.

FLUKTIO

Just as you are in control of entering and exiting a trance state, you are in control of all other aspects of your glossolalic not-knowing. You can *change your style*: from singing to stuttering, from quiet to loud, from neutral to emotional, from one to another emotion. *Change tempo, rhythm,*

tone, breathing technique, or some other central element. Notably, you can also *perform a fluktio to the trance state itself, making a choice about how conscious exactly you want to be at any moment*. You can refine all aspects of your experience, but keep in mind that this is your first step towards assigning meaning. Don't go too fast. Step back and loosen your grip as soon as you notice you're starting to make things up. Keep edging with meaning.

BUT WHY?

It's not enough to protest, or to escape. We must eventually come up with our own language, one that touches what we sense and can communicate it to others. A true language can only emerge in the process of discovering and exploring "nothing." In the beginning, all is *formless and empty, and darkness is over the surface of the deep* (Genesis 1:2).

Jean-Luc Nancy speaks of *timbre*. There is no pitch, duration, or intensity without timbre. Noise also has a timbre. It is the resonance of sound. It forms the first composition of phonetic meaning. Timbre is "communicating what is impossible to communicate, if it is understood that what cannot be communicated is, quite logically, communication itself" (Nancy 2007, 39–40).

In this sense, timbre compares to *ductus*, which Katja Matikainen brings up in connection with *asemic writing*.¹ Ductus means the movement of the hand when writing—not handwriting style, but the gestures used for the act of writing. Ductus includes invisible traces, those moments when the pen is off the paper. It is the bodily, temporal, and spatial resonance of writing. Both glossolalia and asemic writing offer an opportunity to explore the resonance of the hidden subject.

American researcher, writer, and artist Ashon Crawley investigates in his book *Blackpentecostal Breath: the Aesthetics of Possibility* how aesthetics and religious experience can act as tools of liberation. Crawley describes glossolalia in this context as aestheticized breathing, automatically a form of resistance in dangerous and subjugating conditions. Crawley contrasts Black Pentecostal aesthetics with

the austere rigidity of official theology and reads them as a form of queering. He reads *Blackqueerness* and *Blackpentecostal aesthetic* not as an identity but as a method for reading and being in the world. He writes, "The critical academic can produce otherwise universities, ones not beholden to neoliberal logics, ones that produce the as if—the unconditional—through speaking, and celebrating such elaboration of nothingness. (...) glossolalia, which is to say Black Study, is the marking of unruly speech, unproprietous utterances as the foundational soundings for celebratory praise, for change in the world" (Crawley 2017, 238).

My glossolalia practice arises from different roots than Crawley's scholarly and artistic work, but it would not have come into being without exposure to his contribution. I try to practice with an awareness of my own positionality and the complex effects of the global spread of the religion that shaped my grandmother's worldview and her perceptions of different people's roles within it. In my own way, I seek to reimagine and queer my North European identity and my role as a writer-scholar. One of my approaches is to explore novel uses of the transformative spiritual practices taught to me as a child.

My invitation for other scholar-writer-artists to join me in glossolalia as a non-religious, collective art form and ethos is a call to temporarily abandon knowing—playfully, wholeheartedly, vociferously and curiously. I suggest an exploration of the textures, sounds, fragrances, and emotional contours of our shared uncertainty about who we might become, let alone how to save the world. In this practice, I believe it is essential to remain together—like a congregation, a gathering of believers in nothing. One of the roles of artists, as I see it, is to act as if there is more freedom for movement than there truly is, thereby creating spaces for connection and possibilities for change. When we step into academia as artist-scholars, we bring this approach into a different context. We have a chance to model how to inhabit a space where what we say holds nothing and yet allows us to attempt touching reality through that nothingness (Nancy 2018, 149–151). This involves engaging with the pure desire to speak and the act of sharing, attuning ourselves with

1 The essay is included in an asemic poetry collection: Kokko 2020, 25.

our resonating bodies and entire sensory apparatus, while releasing all expectations. By embracing the yearning to sense and be sensed, we open ourselves to possibility.

From this state we can, like young pea plants, begin to *send out aerial filaments to hound the yonder, tending every which way, guessing themselves into arabesques* (Leach 2014, 37). Feeling our way toward trellises, supports, others, we can tenderly begin to say something that we think might be true and helpful right now.

It could be a start.

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