**Chapter 6**

**On the Sound-Sea: Fifteen Ways of Thinking about Sand and Sound**

**Brian Baker**

**1. Sandscape**

Where I grew up, on the north bank of the Thames estuary in Essex, “sandscapes” and “soundscapes” are homophones. The long, lazy vowel in the Essex pronunciation of “sound” is like the slow slipping of the foot into silt and sand, or the filling of the footmark with salt water. The sound of the sea in Southend or Leigh-on-Sea is a gentle lapping, the wash of brownish water on tidal mud, rather than the exhilarating crash of surf on stones. At the river's mouth, the air is briny, with notes of fish and effluent, the particular stink of marsh and mudflat. In Southend, the soundscape is dominated by the cars that pass along the seafront, the gulls, people promenading or walking the dog, and towards the pier, the arcades and Adventure Island and Rossi's ice-cream parlours.

**Fig.7.1** *Murmuration.* Brian Baker, monotype, 2019.

**2. Saturday**

My grandfather Jim worked as a driver during and after the Second World War, taking essential supplies to and from the docks. He had the Londoner's love of the seaside and eventually moved with his sons (one of them my Dad) and his second wife to Essex in the late 1950s. Though always oriented back towards North London, an angel of history passing down the A13 backwards, he drove down to the Southend seafront as often as he could. Regularly, he and my Nan would pick me and my sister up in their Ford Cortina to drive us down to have a stroll along the front and an ice cream at Rossi's. The sound of Jim telling stories or Nan’s good-natured bickering would track a few hours on a Saturday afternoon, before we’d drive home for tea.

Ten to five, the teleprinter, the football results, the Pools. The Pools, a weekly gamble based upon predicting football scores, was run largely by Zetters and Littlewoods, the latter based in another ’Pool – the city of Liverpool. My Nan and Jim played every week but barely won back their stake. A pool of hope, consisting of a million players, trying their predictive skill against the bounce of the ball, the weather, bad refereeing decisions, good or poor play, and the changing form of the teams. Standing in concrete bowls, the sound of the crowd in a football stadium is a reverberation of fifty thousand voices joined together, pooling the sound, channelling it and circulating it. The deep boom of voices is like the sound of the sea against the rocks, the crash and echo of a million droplets of water striking stone.

Saturday afternoon was the time for leisure. With another day of rest to follow, there was no hurry. A stroll along the seafront, some window-shopping, a cup of tea in a café and a lemonade for the kids. Something special for tea, maybe. The sound of leisure was slow time, voices in conversation, catching a little of radio commentary on the cricket, a pause to eat a foil-wrapped sandwich. There’s no hurry.

**3. Silt**

Robert Macfarlane's “Silt” in *The Old Ways* (2012), about the Broomway that runs out onto the sand further east towards the estuary's mouth, at Foulness, focuses on the emptiness, the eerie shimmer of water on mud and sand. He only interacts with the inhabitant of the island who invites him on to Foulness by letter, not in person (access is restricted because of the military firing ranges, the booms from which you can still hear from my parents’ house when the wind is from the east). Out there, beyond Shoeburyness, where the houses dwindle into the marsh, the soundscape empties of human cacophony – unless you bring it with you, of course.

There is very little sound in “Silt”. As Macfarlane and his walking companion leave Foulness island, they hear three oystercatchers as they dart overhead; distant gunfire and a cuckoo; and out on the sands, they “could hear the man whistling to his dog, now far away on the sea wall. Otherwise, there was nothing except bronze sand and mercury water.”[[1]](#endnote-1) As the walkers enter into a depthless, scale-distorting flatness, sound seems to disappear. The writing is intensely visual, visuality leading into interiority, their steps leading both out and in. There is a curious element to the whole walk, however. Warnings and prohibitions are everywhere, from embarking on the walk itself to taking photographs of MoD land. The intertidal space beckons, but is dangerous, as walkers may lose the path, and as Macfarlane notes, the tide can come in quicker than a human being can run. But there is something else, a desire to go out further, to lose the path. As they set out on the walk, Macfarlane notes that “I subdued the alarm my brain was raising at the idea of walking out to sea fully clothed, as only suicides do”;[[2]](#endnote-2) but on the way back he feels “a powerful desire to walk straight out to sea and explore the greater freedoms of this empty tidal world”.[[3]](#endnote-3) On the return journey, they do just that, walking off the path and exploring the flats: “It felt at that moment unarguable that a horizon line might exert as potent a pull upon the mind as a mountain’s summit.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Although the knowledge of the tide’s return, half-suppressed in the shifting sandscape, eventually seeps back into their minds, propelling them back towards shore, there is a longing here, a longing to remain in the empty world. If we creatively conflate the two sentences I quoted above, Macfarlane experiences “a powerful desire to walk straight out to sea […] fully clothed, as only suicides do”.

**4. Speedos**

The music of the Essex seafront is fast electric rhythm and blues, as characterised in the film *Oil City Confidential*, about the Canvey Island band Dr Feelgood. Their gig at the Kursaal, a domed venue on the front, is the stuff of legend. Today, Eight Rounds Rapid continue this tradition, with the son of Wilko Johnson (the original Feelgood's guitarist) flashing his choppy guitar riffs and the lead singer purveying a none-more-Essex vocal style. Their single “Channel Swimmer” lists methods of failed and successful suicides: a car pile-up, the dry swallow of pills, the “swimmer” themselves.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The video was shot on an empty Southend beach, the band clad in Speedos. It begins without music, as three swimmers and their trainer walk in silence down a concrete runway to the beach, where a sharp cut away from their faces reveals the tide is a long, long way out. The band then strike up with a fast, jagged guitar riff, the band now playing their instruments on the beach, all but the guitarist/ trainer in Speedos, swimhat and goggles. The singer leans right into the camera, his long face somehow as rubbery as his hat in the black-and-white footage. Later in the video the band wander along the Southend seafront, play on the penny arcades, and have a beer outside a pub. At the end of the song, the three in swimsuits run off and dive into the water, the tide now back in and, as the trainer watches, seem to disappear like the Channel Swimmers they sing about.

**5. Shellfish**

Jim had a Londoner’s love of shellfish: cockles, whelks and mussels bought from an Old Leigh stall, liberally soused in malt vinegar. A jellied eel was not unknown. Not oysters, though – these had long passed upmarket. Up the Essex coast, at the marshes at Tollesbury, my forebears on my mother’s side worked as oyster fishermen off the mouth of the rivers Crouch and Blackwater. The Carters fished for oysters for generations as cousins worked on the land. I still have the salt water in my veins, as well as the labourer’s spade-like hands.

In “Silt”, Macfarlane notes that “the Broomway is the less notorious of Britain's two great offshore footpaths, the other being the route that crosses the sands of Morecambe Bay”.[[6]](#endnote-6) That’s not the only thing that connects the two spaces, Morecambe and the South East Essex coastline. The respective football teams are known as the Shrimps and the Shrimpers, for instance; for the Bay and the Midland hotel, for Southend read the estuary and the Pier. In Justin Hopper’s excellent site-specific work *Public Record*, recorded with a soundscape by Scanner (Robin Rimbaud), he describes the loss of life to fishermen on their trawlers, accidents when fishing smacks were run down by large merchantmen heading for the Pool of London.[[7]](#endnote-7) This part of the Thames is a busy sea lane now, huge container ships passing by on their way to the giant cranes at the Tilbury port.

Macfarlane also notes the death of the Chinese cockle-pickers on Morecambe Bay in 2004, a stark reminder that sand is also a place of work as well as of leisure, a place of danger as well as pleasure. In North London, when Jim was young, Sunday tea-time would be punctuated by the call of the fishmonger, selling half-pints of cockles, whelks and winkles in their shells for high tea. From the Thames estuary, where the boats would bring in their “catch” of shellfish, to the tables of Camden Town, a taste and smell and sound of the sea.

**Fig.7.2**  *Newborough*. Brian Baker, pastel on paper, 2019.

**Silence**

I stood on the beach at Newborough, on Anglesey, on a grey afternoon. We had been there as a family many times. The beach has its own micro-climate, caused by the passage of the water through the Menai Staits and the presence of Snowdonia, looming behind Caernarvon, where clouds bubble up as the heat rises from the mountains. The beach is wide and curved and, when the tide goes out, you can walk across to a small island where there stood a lighthouse and is now a nature reserve. On the other side of this tidal isthmus is an even wider curve of sand that tends to be much quieter, with fewer dog walkers and families. The sand is hard and compacted when the tide goes out, and the undulations of the beach’s topography forms pools that slowly drain, leaving islands and then expanses of rippled sand. I have been there in all seasons, with high tide and low, with the wind whipping sand off the dunes and the kite-surfers zooming along the waves, with a soft rain falling, and with the sun glittering from the surface of the sea. I have recorded my young daughter shouting “splish, splash” as she jumped over the small waves as they came in, holding on to my hand. I have walked here with my wife, both bundled up against the cold, my ears envying her woollen hat.

**6. Sea and Sand and Stones**

Analemmatic clocks, made by my wife Deniz from rounded slate shards, tell the time of the beach. Stones form lines, traps for toes. The sound of a quickly in-drawn breath. A stone beach has a sound of its own: a boom as the wave descends, then a “shh” as the sea recedes, accompanied by a million knocks of rock on rock, the workings of a geological clock as the stones roll, pulled back down the beach. Sand is weathered stone, stones at the granular level, their hiss at frequencies the human ear cannot catch. The stone beach, every few seconds, presents to the ear the workings of a sidereal mechanism that tolls the cosmological hour. It is the earth’s clock, the moon’s clock, the star’s clock.

In the story told by The Who’s album *Quadrophenia*, Jimmy, a young Mod, suffering from a personality disorder that Pete Townshend dubs “quadrophenia”, has a kind of breakdown, and travels from his South London home to Brighton, where he has an epiphany at the sea-side.[[8]](#endnote-8) The first song on the double album, “This Is the Sea”, is a soundscape: amidst the sonic wash of high waves crashing on to Brighton’s stony beach, wisps of songs pass like ghosts, or tolling on the offshore breeze. Each of the musical motifs relates to one of the band members, four become one in the sea. The album ends ambiguously: the listener doesn’t know whether Jimmy ends his life in the sea (one of the songs is called “Drowned”) or whether he simply throws off the burdens of being a Mod. The double-album comprises four sides of music and a booklet of a textual narrative and a series of photographs illustrating Jimmy’s journey. Jimmy feels the tension between wanting to be the “real me”, an individual, with the pleasures of being a Face in the crowd as a kind of crisis or rupture.

Jimmy’s journey to the sea can be thought of as an enactment of a desire to “drown” and dissolve the unsustainable fragmentation of quadrophenia in a “oneness” that is without boundaries altogether. Total dissolution, death by drowning, is implied in the shot where Jimmy is fully submerged under the water. This is not the last shot, however. Jimmy makes it to “The Rock”, and the final shots in the booklet show him walking alone on the shore, half-in and half-out of the water. In these images *Quadrophenia*, the album, rejects suicide as a means by which to transcend the disabling tensions produced by masculine subjectivity and the need to rupture it and to “explode” out of it. Instead, Jimmy maroons himself on another beach, walking the tideline, *between* the sea and the sand rather than *by* it. The imagery of the rock, phallically protruding from the sea but deeply invaginated, echoes this concept of the beach not only as the place where he feels “real”, but also one where the constructions of gender are themselves in flux.

**7. Sound/less**

The opening of Iris Murdoch’s *The Sea The Sea* (1978) begins with the description of the coastline by a first-person narrator, whose eye is wonderfully painterly:

The sea which lies before me as I write glows rather than sparkles in the bland May sunshine. With the tide turning, it leans quietly against the land, almost unflecked by ripples or by foam. Near to the horizon it is a lustrous purple, spotted with regular lines of emerald green. At the horizon it is indigo. Near to the shore, where my view is framed by rising heaps of lumpy yellow rock, there is a band of lighter green, icy and pure, less radiant, opaque however, not transparent.[[9]](#endnote-9)

This is the beginning of a “memoir” which, we are told, has been inserted into the beginning of a “diary” or “chronicle” written by the narrator: a more formal piece of writing, a set-piece, transplanted into the start of something more informal. What is noticeable about the opening is its visual power, its intention to make the reader *see*: what we do not find here is *sound*. This is narrative description as a painting, a visual spectacle rendered into language. It renders the scene marvellously but is distanced from it because there is no soundscape, no immersion in the world. We could be in a gallery describing a painting.

By comparison, Cynan Jones’s *Cove* (2016), a novella that narrates the experience of a fisherman struck by lightning while at sea, begins: “You hear, on the slight breeze, the *tunt tunt, tunt tunt* before you see the boat. You feel illicit.”[[10]](#endnote-10) This first section is narrated by the fisherman’s pregnant wife, waiting on the beach for her husband’s return. On the beach she sees the doll, washed up, of a missing child; later in the novella, but earlier in time, the fisherman also encounters the doll, a rather over-determined symbol of loss and trauma. When the lightning strikes, sound is as important as vision:

The wind picks up, cold air moving in front of the storm.

And then there is a basal roll. The sound of a great weight landing. A slow tearing in the sky.

One repeated word. No, no, no.

When it hits him there is a bright white light.[[11]](#endnote-11)

In this passage, the flash of lightning, the intense moment of vision that ends vision (as it shocks him into unconsciousness) closes the world of sound, completes it. The wind, the thunder, the words: and then the strike.

**Fig.7.3** *Llangrannog*. Brian Baker, monotype and watercolour on paper, 2019.

**8. Surf**

In *The Soundscape*, Murray Schafer writes: “What was the first sound heard? It was the caress of the waters.”[[12]](#endnote-12) But the sound of the sea can be more violent, more overwhelming than a caress. The overwhelming sound of the sea is surf: high, white and green. Breakers grasp and sting the slate of Llangrannog on the Ceredigion coast of Wales, cliff faces etched black by salt and spray. Sand flies cling to legs, searching for wrack. On another day, jellyfish lay in terminal pools, transparent innards on show, an alien submarine squadron crashed to earth. Dogs scatter the sand as it spurts behind them as they sprint; or, they stand in the surf, backside to the sea, waiting.

The hiss, the shell-roar, the deep cough of the waves expiring like radio static on the sand: an ocean of sound, a sound-sea. The notched slate tooth at Llangrannog, Carreg Bica, looms in my peripheral vision like someone sitting up on the rocks behind me, knees up, face jutting towards the horizon. As Joe Banks suggests in *Rorschach Audio,*my mind makes pattern from abstraction, meaning from meaninglessness. The metaphors I use for the sea also suggest a presence or voice: a hiss, a whisper, a roar. The sea possesses subjectivity; not Neptune, but a negotiation between the sea itself and the one who stands and hears. The tideline, moving up and down the strand, is a marker of this negotiation. The beach is an intertidal space, there and not there; the sound of the sea recedes, dims perhaps, twice during the day.

At the end of Jack Kerouac’s *Big Sur*, there appears a poem in free verse called “SEA: Sounds of the Pacific Ocean at Big Sur”. In it, the onomatopoeic qualities of language are used to bring forth the experience of being next to the sea, standing on the shore while the sound of the surf envelops the reader. The method is explicitly Joycean – later, we find the lines “Green winds on tamarack vines– / Joyce-James-Shhish– / Sea – Sssssss – see” – in a *Finnegans Wake*-emulating fullness of language, the rolling of the waves around the tongue. [[13]](#endnote-13) There is something Babel-like in the acoustic qualities of the verse, language shifting from onomatopoeia (“roll, roll”) to a neologism (“pali andarva”) to a purely phonic rendition of sound (“Shish”) to French (“parler”). It is as if the sea contains all languages, is the mother of languages (“speak you parler / in this my mother’s /parlor”), and speaks in a multitude of tongues.[[14]](#endnote-14)

The single individual, Kerouac’s male seeker, encounters a feminine multitude, and wants to be part of the sonic conversation by emulating and transcribing it, yet reinforces separation from it. The persona turns his back on the sea, frightened by the waves and surf and sound, refusing communion with it. Instead, the male seeker turns within himself: “Not tempest as still & awful / as the tempest within”.[[15]](#endnote-15) The tempest within, in Kerouac’s work, is of course represented by language, by the tumbling, ongoing streams of internal speech. The beginning of *Big Sur*’s first chapter indicates that there is no tension between the language of Kerouac’s narrative prose and the method of “SEA”:

I wake up drunk, sick, disgusted, frightened, in fact terrified by that sad song across the roofs mingling with the lachrymose cries of a Salvation Army meeting on the corner below […] and worse than that the sound of old drunks throwing up in rooms next to mine, the creak of hall steps, the moans everywhere – including the moan that awakened me, my own moan in the lumpy bed, a moan caused by a big roaring Whoo Whoo in my head that had shot me out of my pillow like a ghost.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Where the end of *Big Sur* is a kind of encounter with sound as other, even if one that is ultimately refused, here sound is infernal, torturing – and corresponds to the wreckage and wailing within. The trajectory of the novel is from one soundscape to another, as much as it is from the city to the sea: but peace, tranquillity, silence, is impossible to find or represent until the novel ends and we are left with the blank, white page.

**Silence**

I stood, on a grey March day, on the beach at Newborough. We had been there as a family many times. In the past few months I had suffered what used to be called “a breakdown”, but with help of family and doctors I had carried on functioning. I was suffering from – I do suffer from – depression, long undiagnosed. Both deep-rooted and more recent events had finally caused my coping mechanisms – to withdraw, to close down, to empty myself out, to become nothing – to finally malfunction. I had imagined driving to this beach, early in the morning, without telling anyone. I had imagined not coming back.

**9. Starlings**

At Aberystwyth, the starlings swirl in a large, ever-shifting flock above the pier, a few metres from the beach. This graceful, uncanny group motion is called a murmuration. The pulsing, fluid pattern suggests intelligence, a mind that co-ordinates the motion. The organic forms seem to coalesce, transform, disperse and re-form in constant flux. Yet there is no call, no chatter as of swallows in flight. The starlings in their murmuration gather and fly to the hush of the sea and the call of the gulls. A helix, a tornado, a Miro, a Barbara Hepworth, dancing in the sky above the pier.

**Fig.7.4** *Murmuration*. Brian Baker, monotype and ink on paper, 2019.

**10. Seabirds**

I saw a photograph someone had taken while standing on a promenade. It was a close-up, the photographer’s left hand clutching a double cheeseburger, which was in the process of falling apart. Above the burger bun stared the yellow eye of a gull, its beak speared through the bread in a contest for possession. The beak was open, and the look in the bird’s eye was piratical. The photo appeared as a parody of those lovingly framed bistro-burgers impaled by a cocktail stick, a spiky spindle. This burger, however, would soon be airborne.

A gull is a seabird, but a gull is also a credulous fool. As a verb, to gull is to deceive, make a fool of.

The call of gulls, between a raven's caw and hyena's laugh, are a mockery. They wheel and eye the walking, wing-tips feeling for flaws in the wind. They sail, lift, screech. They insist the space is their own.

 “The Seabirds” is the first song on The Triffids 1985 album *Born Sandy Devotional*.[[17]](#endnote-17) The front cover of the album is an aerial shot of the coast of Western Australia, where the band were formed: in particular, Mandurah township, with aquamarine seas, sand the colour of ripening barley, and an inlet taking a stream to the sea. “The Seabirds”, however, like several other tracks on the album (“Tarrilup Bridge”, “Lonely Stretch”) is about loss and death. It is a kind of grand, melodramatic ballad, given Country inflections by Graham Lee’s swooping pedal-steel guitar work. The lead singer, David McComb, sings of a man whose relationship has failed and who finds himself on a beach, listening to the screams of the gulls as they pick at the eyes and bodies of the fish in the bay, turning the water red. The “devotional” in the album title gives a sense of the apocalyptic or even scriptural quality of the scene we are given; this is not quite the Gothic territory of Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, but the two bands did have the same bassist, Martyn P. Casey.

The protagonist of the song swims out to the reef, the coral cutting his skin, another image of blood in the water. He offers himself to the birds, avowing that he is no longer afraid to die, but the gulls will not touch him, even when his dead body is washed up on the beach. Underpinning the song is a sense of isolation, that there was no one there to tell him that there was another path, and the song ends with an accusation, to the listener perhaps: where were you? In “The Seabirds”, the sand is a terminal space, haunted by the cries of gulls. But there is a sense here that this death was not inevitable, even if the gulls are indifferent.

**11. Suicides**

In the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth cantos of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri and Virgil approach the Seventh Circle, which holds the Violent. In the outer part of this circle are the violent against others, who are tormented in like manner. The middle part holds the violent against themselves, “and therefore in the second round must repent in vain whoever robs himself of your world or gambles away or dissipates his wealth, lamenting where he should rejoice”.[[18]](#endnote-18) In the inner part of the Seventh Circle are the violent against God, nature and against art. Between the second and third rounds, however, lies a boundary: “the ground was a dry, deep sand” populated by “herds of naked souls who were all lamenting miserably”.[[19]](#endnote-19)

In the middle, or Second round Dante encounters the Suicides. In a typically striking image, the souls of suicides are flung by Minos to the seventh depth, where they land as seeds, randomly, and sprout “like a grain of spelt and rise to a sapling and a savage tree; then the Harpies, feeding on its leaves, cause pain and for the pain an outlet”.[[20]](#endnote-20) The Harpies themselves cry horribly, and the trees wail their lamentations. These souls or shades of the suicides take the form of gnarled, twisted, thorny trees which, like the one Dante found himself in before encountering the door to the Underworld, creates a trackless wood. The Promethean punishment, that the leaves grow to be pecked and eaten by the Harpies, indicates the extent of this trespass against God’s will. At judgement day, one of the trees explains,

“Like the rest we shall go for the cast-off flesh we have left, but not so that any of us will be clothed in it again, for it is not just that one should have that of which he robs himself. We shall drag them here and through the dismal wood our bodies will be hung, each on the bush of its injurious shade.”[[21]](#endnote-21)

This odd echo of crucifixion, taking place for all eternity, is a harrowing prospect that leaves Dante speechless with pity. The orderless, trackless wood, filled with the lamentation of those whose suicide is a rejection of God’s grace, borders the sand and is, in a sense, as lifeless and as tormenting as that scorching sand. Here, nothing grows, but as pain, a typically symbolic instantiation of what is assumed to be a perversion of the principles of life.

In *Notes on Suicide*, Simon Critchley traces Sigmund Freud’s writing about depression in the 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia”. “What happens in depression”, Critchley writes, “is that the self turns against itself, the subject makes itself into an object, and complains bitterly”.[[22]](#endnote-22) Freud’s point, he suggests, is that

in order to kill ourselves we have to turn ourselves into objects. More precisely, we have to turn ourselves into objects that we hate. Thus, suicide is strictly speaking impossible. I cannot kill *myself*. What I kill is the hated object that I have become.[[23]](#endnote-23)

 This is Freud’s point, Critchley argues: “Suicide is the determination to rid ourselves of what enslaves us: the mind, the head, the brain, that vague area of febrile activity somewhere behind the eyes.”[[24]](#endnote-24) This is why David Foster Wallace, in *This Is Water*, noted that people shoot themselves in the head, not the heart, Critchley explains.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Suicide, then, is a form of rebellion, as Dante imagined. Where the medieval Florentine presented this in terms of God’s will, Critchley (following Freud) sees it as a rebellion against the rational subject, the thinking consciousness. It is an inversion of the *cogito*, or the *cogito* re-conceptualised through the death drive, where death is a return to quiescence, the end of suffering: not “I think therefore I am”, but “I/you think therefore I/you must die”.

**12. Sirens**

One of my favourite bands is the Cocteau Twins. Their music, with the chiming, reverberating guitar work of Robin Guthrie, and the soaring soprano vocals of Elizabeth Fraser, often forms soundscapes, particularly when drums and percussion are absent (as on 1987’s *Victorialand*).[[26]](#endnote-26) Their album with Harold Budd, the pianist who often plays “treated” piano, *The Moon and the Melodies* (1986) begins with “Sea, Swallow Me”, a rare direct reference to the sea in this most oceanic of bands.[[27]](#endnote-27) Perhaps Fraser’s most well-known performance, however, was not with the Cocteau Twins, but with This Mortal Coil, a collective formed by the founder of the Cocteau Twins’ record label, 4AD, Ivo Watts-Russell. She sings on a cover version of Tim Buckley’s “Song to the Siren”, from the point of view of a protagonist who has been “shipwrecked” in the ocean, and has been pulled to safety by the Siren, who sings and promises to enfold the sailor.[[28]](#endnote-28)

The lyrics are clearly a metaphor for love, loss and desire as much as they tell a story, although there is an intense visuality which finds a strange counterpoint in Fraser’s vocal delivery which, like on Cocteau Twins tracks, almost masks language and performs *song as sound*. Here, though, there is much more purchase on lyrical clarity than on “Sea, Swallow Me”, as the singer stands among the breakers and wonders whether s/he should lie with “death, my bride”. As sung by Tim Buckley, this is a song sung *to* the siren, as the title suggests; but sung by Fraser, this seems like the song *of* the siren, the gender reversal rendering the song opaque and ambiguous, if musically lovely. Rather than Buckley telling us, at second hand, of the Siren’s song, Fraser enacts it, and offers the consoling, enticing sound of the Siren herself.

**Silence**

I stood on the beach at Newborough. My wife and two daughters were there with me. I stared at the sea, and they did not know what I was doing. My younger daughter spoke to me but I did not hear and, I was told later, I did not respond. Something within me, something that wanted to hold and protect me above all else, called to me. I wanted, very much, to walk directly into the sea, fully clothed. But I stayed, standing on the beach.

**13. Sunday**

Morrissey’s second solo single, released in May 1988, was “Everyday Is Like Sunday”.[[29]](#endnote-29) Composed by Stephen Street in a jangling guitar-pop style that strongly recalled the sound of The Smiths, Morrissey’s vocals are in the second person, singing to a “you” who lives in a declining seaside town, where nothing ever happens, the shops are all closed, and all you can do is wait to leave. There is an apocalyptic edge to the chorus, where it is called down almost as a relief from the boredom, to finish the job that the Luftwaffe or post-war “redevelopment” left incomplete. As usual, Morrissey’s arch delivery provides a comic edge to the gloom, almost satirising the teenage angst that seemed to make up much of his constituency in the 1980s (including me). In the video, however, Morrissey hardly appears, except for in a waggish final shot, where he appears to be standing on the beach. For the foregoing three minutes, the video follows a day in the life of a young woman in just such a seaside town. It could be Southport, it could be Morecambe, it could be Skegness; but the video was shot, in fact, on the seafront of Southend-on-Sea. One short scene also features the young woman in a record shop: Golden Disc, which I recognised as I spent many teenage hours browsing there. (The other main record shop was Parrot Records in the “precinct” at the other end of the High Street, a windowless cave of a shop that contained many independent-label treasures). At a time when opening hours were still heavily restricted in the UK, Sunday was not a time for browsing records, but for listening to them in your room.

**Fig. 7.5** *Soundscape*. Brian Baker, mixed media/collage, 2019.

**14. Soundscape**

In *The Soundscape*, Murray Schafer writes about *“keynote sounds, signals* and *soundmarks*”. The keynote sounds are “those created by [...] geography and climate”; “Signals are foreground sounds and are listened to consciously”; and soundmarks refers to “a community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by people in that community”.[[30]](#endnote-30) The soundscape, constituted by all the keynotes, signals and soundmarks themselves constitute place but also, in various ways, constitute subjectivity. In soundtracks, we Walk(man) or playlist or score our environments, internally and externally. In Essex, soundtracks are sand-tracks, ways across the silt, ways out from the shore and safely back in, following the signals.

Soundscapes, like landscapes, are an environment. They are immersive. A soundscape can exist independently of any visual stimuli: close your eyes and *hear*. (Or, perhaps: close your eyes and *see*.) For me, growing up on a coastline, sand inevitably calls up the sea. I’m no desert-dweller. The sand is the doorway to the ocean, to another kind of immersion. If the sandy beach is an intertidal space, it is also the space of possibility, of becomings, of journeys. It is the space of transformation: of rock into stones, of stones into pebbles, of pebbles into sand. It is also the space of conjuration, of rituals: to go out, and to journey back. As in the cases of John Stonehouse or Reginald Perrin, you leave your clothes on the beach as a marker of your disappearance, a fraudulent dip into nothingness; or, as in “Everyday is like Sunday”, you can come back from a swim to find your clothes have been stolen. A small stone taken from the beach is a memento but it is also something ritual. The sound of a shell, which when put to your ear seems to contain the sea itself, is a murmuration. The spiral of the seashell, the spiral of the cochlea, guides us inwards to the centre, and outwards to the edge. What we hear in the shell is the sea; what we hear in the shell is ourselves.

1. Robert Macfarlane, *The Old Ways* (London: Penguin, 2013), 69. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Macfarlane, *The Old Ways*, 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Macfarlane, *The Old Ways*, 73. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Macfarlane, *The Old Ways*, 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Eight Rounds Rapid, *Lossleader* (Cadiz Records, 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Macfarlane, *The Old Ways*, 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Justin Hopper, *Public Record*, 2013. http://www.justin-hopper.com/public-record-estuary/ [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The Who*, Quadrophenia* (Track Records, 1973). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Iris Murdoch, *The Sea The Sea* (London: Vintage, 1999), 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Cynan Jones, *Cove* (London: Granta, 2016), 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Jones, *Cove*, 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. R. Murray Schafer, *Our Sonic Environment and The Soundscape: the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994), 15. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Jack Kerouac, *Big Sur* (London: Penguin, 2012), 172. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Kerouac, *Big Sur*, 173. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Kerouac, *Big Sur*, 185. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Kerouac, *Big Sur*, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. The Triffids, *Born Sandy Devotional* (Hot Records, 1985). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 147. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Dante, *Inferno*, 184. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Dante, *Inferno*, 171. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Dante, *Inferno*, 171-2. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Simon Critchley, *Notes on Suicide* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2015), 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Critchley, *Notes on Suicide*, 48-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Critchley, *Notes on Suicide*, 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. David Foster Wallace, *This is Water: Some Thoughts on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Cocteau Twins, *Victorialand* (4AD, 1987). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Cocteau Twins and Harold Budd, *The Moon and the Melodies* (4AD, 1986). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. This Mortal Coil, *It’ll End in Tears* (4AD, 1984). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Morrissey, *Viva Hate* (HMV, 1988). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 9-10. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)