

DANIEL ALLEN COX

The Glow of Electrum

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THERE'S NO GUARANTEE A STUTTERER CAN say their own name. I routinely slip down the rounded edge of my own first initial, unable to climb it easily. When I was younger and someone asked for my name, I sometimes gave them an alias, thinking myself clever to be Eric or Ian or Oscar—free of the consonant I was born with—until I got stuck in the glue trap of the vowel I had chosen. Now, getting my name out could take a few seconds—a lifetime in speech years. Everyone reads the delay differently. It's not that I refuse to identify myself; I can simply do more with six letters than the average human.

Don't say Stuttering, say Childhood Onset Fluency Disorder. Thank you, American Psychiatric Association. I'll use whichever comes out first.

Back when I was a Jehovah's Witness, unable to see beyond the ideological confines of my life, I couldn't have known that my stutter was my ticket out. My mouth became a locus of shame at the Kingdom Hall, where we attended meetings several times a week. To "pass into the kingdom of heaven" is not to "pass through the eye of a needle," as the Bible says, but rather, through the obstacle course of my mouth. My face contorted when I blocked. My sibilants hissed to a messy end. When I tried to avoid answering questions during Bible study, various congregation members would remind me that Moses had an "infirmity of speech" and that I should be brave—and patient. I was told that after Jehovah God destroyed the wicked at Armageddon, we Wit-

nesses would inherit the earth and live forever in Paradise. When that happened, my stutter would be cured.

In order to “give a good witness” when we preached door-to-door, we were supposed to be eloquent, mellifluous. After all, we were ambassadors of Jehovah, and it would reflect badly on Him if we hesitated when speaking to householders, as if we weren’t dead sure of the message. The *Theocratic Ministry School Guidebook*, which we studied to refine our preaching skills, said, “In speaking, the more common causes of lack of fluency are lack of clear thinking and preparation of the material. It can also result from a weak vocabulary or a poor choice of words.... There, the problem is particularly serious, because in some instances, your audience will literally walk out on you.”

I would only gain “clear thinking” years after I walked out on the Witnesses. Until such time, I would play by their rules. Jehovah would love me *despite* my speech, and I would be grateful.

I gave my first Bible talk when I was thirteen. I read from the Book of Ezekiel and explained what it meant, simply regurgitating whatever I had read in *The Watchtower* magazine. I stood at a wood lectern that was stained by the sweaty hands of first talks. My own wet fingers stuck to the onion-skin Bible pages as I turned to Ezekiel Chapter 38. I would have preferred to read from a vision in Chapter 1. “And their appearance and their structure were just as when a wheel proved to be in the midst of a wheel.... And I got to see something like the glow of electrum.”

This is exactly what you’d find if you looked inside my mouth: wheels inside wheels, and electrum—an unholy alloy of silver, gold, and traces of copper. You would see the mechanisms of the *betweenness* of stuttering. It is where words fail me that language truly begins.

As I expounded from the podium, an elder graded my performance by checking off boxes on the Speech Counsel Sheet.

Volume. (Was I expounding loudly enough?)

Pausing. (Perhaps once too often?)

Repetition for Emphasis. (You’ve got to be kidding me.)

Fluency. (A word I no longer use.)

Timing. (You have no idea what I’m building to, in the shadow of that mountain of a word.)

The Speech Counsel Sheet was the ultimate scrutiny. You couldn’t have devised a more hellish panopticon for a stutterer. And it was ignorant, because the points it listed had no nuance. Not all hesitations are composed of the same materials. Some are opaque, others a barely perceptible half-step. A filler word can sound like the real thing. Some-

times the body continues moving through a word; the mouth freezes but the foot taps on. Or the body can get stuck as the bridge between two concepts, a stop-motion work of art. Whatever the case, to observe a stutterer is to time travel.

The people who say the Tetragrammaton is unpronounceable aren't used to filling in vowels on the fly. Ultimately, the *YHWH*—or *JHVH*—that appears in the Bible over seven thousand times is only a problem for those who don't regularly substitute more difficult words for easier ones. A stutterer is a walking thesaurus, because we are always ready with a word replacement. We can make shit up in the first few seconds of trouble.

Silences, however, can be embarrassingly loud squeaks, evasions, hums, or teeth chatters, and not silences at all. When a stutterer tries to insert a meaningful pause—an intentional hesitation—it reads as just another stutter, and often, as indecision.

I feel that Leonard Cohen understood this.

*You tell me that silence
is nearer to peace than poems
but if for my gift
I brought you silence
(for I know silence)
you would say
 This is not silence
 this is another poem
and you would hand it back to me.*

I somehow got through my Bible reading, sweating puddles through my white dress shirt. I watched the elder mark “Work on This,” “Improved,” or “Good” beside the boxes on the sheet, shifting in his chair as he decided whether I had a voice befitting a messenger of God.

I'm certain I stuttered, but I don't remember where. Maybe my entire discourse was a giant blockage. Maybe the audience attributed any smoothness on my part to assistance from Jehovah, as if the words of the prophet Ezekiel transformed my larynx, mouth, and forked tongue, healing me on their way out. “You are not being sent to many peoples speaking an unintelligible language or an unknown tongue, whose words you cannot understand. If I would send you to them, they would listen to you.”

Why couldn't I have been raised in a church that spoke in tongues? Then, my glossolalia would at least be worth something.

The promise of Paradise didn't stop my mother from taking me to speech therapy. After all, there was still preaching work to do, and I was a "defective" missionary. Kids made fun of me at school, mimicking my anguished "stutter-face"—what I perceived as my ugliness reflected. The idea was that therapy could help me blend in a little better. A preacher always does his best work undercover.

Paula, a speech therapist at the Montreal Children's Hospital, sat at a low table and smiled widely, making herself as kidlike and unthreatening as possible. Her office walls were covered in colourful posters that showed the body parts involved in producing speech. In our sessions, she demystified the collaboration between diaphragm and lungs, jaw and nasal passage, tongue and lips. To say the "e" that started my age—*eleven*—I had to keep the middle of my tongue rounded upward, the sides lightly touching the fillings in my top and bottom teeth, some of them silver, and perhaps electrum itself.

Paula's fluency-shaping program operated on a theory that middle ear muscles interfere with the timing of "auditory feedback"—how the speaker hears their own voice. So she made me speak into a flexible straw stuck in my ear. If I was an igneous intrusion—a former volcano with interrupted lava flow—she wanted me to listen to the rumblings. What I heard were spit bubbles.

The therapy also included "gentle onset." You approach a consonant with a slow buildup of voice, the same way you would creep up the walkway to someone's front door with a *Watchtower* magazine. This helps avoid a block. "Do it breathy, like Marilyn Monroe," Paula told me. I asked random questions of shopkeepers and other strangers, and heavy-breathed my way through telephone fact-finding missions. Marilyn, it turns out, was also a stutterer.

I fell away from speech therapy ever so gradually, as gently as Paula had taught me to approach words—or tried to. The therapy hadn't delivered the promised results, and perhaps it had gotten too expensive for my parents. Maybe I had simply outgrown the Children's Hospital. I'm sure speech therapy was valuable to many stutterers my age and I didn't want to take that away from them. But walking out of the hospital for the last time, I toyed with a new thought: *what if there were nothing wrong with my speech?*

Once I allowed strangeness of speech back into my life, my inner, unchecked narrative could finally flourish. I could listen through my straw and hear the natural rhythms of my breath. Without the strain of overcorrection, ideas came out in the shape they needed to, unmoored from expectation.

It was a Cohen-like opening.

*There is a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in.*

This crack led to a fissure, which led to a crevasse, which eventually led to me calving away from the organization that was so very interested in my speech. Discontinuing speech therapy represented the first act of me leaving Jehovah's Witnesses. My stutter was important to the group because it was how they could control and manipulate me. They wanted to stamp out any queer sounds. My stutter ended up being a kernel of resistance that was there when I needed it.

I would eventually forget Paula's voice completely. That had been her goal: to make sure I could only hear mine.

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I noticed something curious at the weekly meetings when we belted out hymns from *Sing Praises to Jehovah*, the piano thundering through our middle ears:

I didn't stutter when I sang. Neither did Marilyn.

I suppose this is what led me to form an alternative rock band with two of my congregation friends, Mike and Danny. We were roughly the same age and hung out after meetings, usually in the basement of Danny's parents' house. We soon picked up on each other's musical sensibilities. Making music was allowed in Jehovah's Witnesses, if we didn't try to emulate singers who were *worldly*, meaning anyone outside *the truth*—our JW bubble. It was easy for us to keep the sex and drugs out of our rock and roll, because we had neither.

We called ourselves The Sixth Sense. This was the early 1990s, before the famous film of the same name. I came up with it while studying phototropism, a plant's ability to find light. I figured it was a cool sixth sense to aspire to. Danny played bass, and Mike and I both played guitar. We bought a set of second-hand drums and took turns whacking them, not realizing the skins were busted. We were heavy on effects pedals and melodrama, recording tracks at the same studio where Céline—yes, *that* one—rehearsed in secret.

When Pink Floyd announced they were coming to Olympic Stadium, Danny and I camped in a mall parking lot overnight to wait for tickets. We smoked weed and drank Southern Comfort in the bitter cold of February while security followed us from tent to tent. We further bonded at the concert itself, growing evermore comfortably numb under the giant, inflatable pigs that floated overhead. With their

album *The Wall*, Pink Floyd had dreamt of separation between band and world. We dreamt of separation between our lives as musicians and our lives as Jehovah's Witnesses. I was just happy to have created a world where staccato attacks came from the instruments I played, not from my mouth.

We were hostage to our influences. We wanted to be original, but sounding too much like the bands we listened to was a constant menace. At least we weren't Christian Rock. At some point, every band asks themselves: is our "sound" the sound we are making? Judging by the criteria on the Speech Counsel Sheet, I was sure we'd nailed it.

Enthusiasm. (We mistook the hormones of puberty for genius.)

Warmth, feeling. (Southern Comfort in a tent, anyone?)

Confidence and poise. (We named our debut cassette *You Are Now Halfway to the Equator*, unaware that we were actually halfway to nowhere.)

Music freed me from the inside out. I began to realize that this world-making was a way of neutralizing—if not counteracting—the Witness brainwashing I had been subjected to for years. I was trying to create a mythology, through lyrics and arrangements, that was as complex and encompassing as the one the Witnesses had created for me and then policed my adherence to. In other words, our wild bouts of flange and distortion, our meandering solos, our naked cynicism—it was all impenetrable to the Watch Tower Society and its teachings. In music, I could orchestrate myself out of the Society's cult-like grip, one note at a time.

I'm embarrassed when I read our lyrics all these years later. The songs are rife with cliché 90s rock imagery, bad rhymes, and descriptions of utopia I'm afraid are more closely aligned to Witness teaching than to the freedom I was reaching for. But there's a line that haunts and encourages me, because it shows I understood how to find a way out of religion.

Sometimes the only way to know is to feel.

And feel I did. On weekends I took the night bus from the suburbs to clubs downtown and went home with men twice my age, the ones I had fantasized about for years. Some seemed hesitant to touch me, aware of the delicate crossroads I had reached. Others fucked me with abandon. I loved it all. For many of these men, it was the first time they had ever let a Jehovah's Witness inside the house. The Watch Tower literature was clear: "No apologies, no concessions, no ambiguity—homosexuality is detestable in God's sight." *But what if God can't see?* I thought. My stutter filled the darkness as I told my hook-ups about

what I wanted for my life, and in so doing, I proselytized myself out of *the truth*.

Danny was the first to leave, slipping away on the vapours of drugs and the thinnest of strings. He was the best musician in our trio, but I was more jealous of his dark lyrics: evidence of a deeper soul, someone who thought for himself. He disappeared into the party scene and I wouldn't see him for decades.

I was next. I sent a letter to the congregation, declaring myself a homo and renouncing my dedication to Jehovah. I left an entire life behind with a few pen strokes. Within days, almost everyone I knew either shunned me or stood by while others did it. I finally experienced the end of the world I had spent countless hours warning my neighbours about. Mike, however, stayed in touch. He remained a Witness but never cut ties with me, which was a clear violation of the rules. That must have been difficult for him.

I left home and moved into a studio apartment downtown, across from the Montreal Children's Hospital, where I sat in the windowsill watching the bats play in the willows, wondering if I had seen or heard them as a kid through the window of Paula's office. I busked in the subway to pay rent, playing covers on my acoustic guitar and drumming on a plastic garbage can decorated with the neckties I had once worn in field service. This pathetic display earned me three dollars an hour, but it also earned me friends. I eventually found a community much bigger than the one I had lost.

Once I got a job with a steady paycheque, I stopped singing and playing guitar because it was too powerful a reminder of the rupture I had suffered. I reluctantly pawned my acoustic, only to find it hanging in the window a week later, going for three times what they'd paid me for it. The Sixth Sense might have broken up anyhow, but losing my community still felt like losing music; once the bass line underpinning my life was stripped away, all the notes floated, uncertain.

Around this time, I spotted Leonard Cohen on boulevard Saint-Laurent peeking into a bagel shop. He had an angel on his arm, and I had one of his songs on my lips.

*When they said REPENT
I wonder what they meant*

I was tempted to follow him for a few blocks, but that's not how we do it in Montreal. The sun was low, it wasn't yet dusk; his fedora was a sundial, casting the hour on the sidewalk behind him. Turns out I've always been living in this hour, trailing bagel crumbs that I hope will lead to Saint Leonard.

My jaw hurts as I type this, reliving four decades of stutters. My face retains the pressure of every contortion. I've put my night guard on in the middle of the day to prevent my teeth from grinding. I keep taking it out to sip coffee. Did my stutter grow in proportion to my mouth? It's difficult to know because nobody will tell me. I have bad days when I don't stutter at all and I feel like an impostor.

I cannot rid myself of the urge to play again. An inherited acoustic guitar sits atop one of my bookshelves, a taunt. I often find myself gazing up at it; the dusty curves, the wood panels where someone's palm sweat has soaked through. Sometimes before a writing session, I'll blast music and sing out the scenes until I'm hoarse and my soul is shaking with joy. If Witness brainwashing is a chronic condition in me—and I believe that to be the case—maybe I need music in my life forever as a buffer between me and the thinking I can't expel. After all, music was the first treatment I chose.

In "The (Loud) Soundtrack to My Struggle with Faith," Anna Gazmarian writes about grappling with her evangelical upbringing and finding solace in screamo music. "The incoherent lyrics and reckless drum solos reminded me of the gnashing of teeth, which the New Testament deploys as a statement of grief. This was the closest I came to worshipping God in years." I wonder about the nature of my own sixth sense, if I can ever hear music without feeling religious, if I can ever seek light that doesn't come from above.

Hard "j" is an affricate phoneme; to say "Jehovah" is to start with a blockage—the unpronounceable—followed by a coronal consonant, the flexible tip of the tongue releasing into audible friction. I wonder if when I stopped using the name in daily conversation, it was simply preference for the blockage. If I was more comfortable in a language where the Tetragrammaton was unpronounceable. Maybe the dialect of stuttering wasn't a deficiency but an endowment; it blessed me with the inability to say the name that has caused me the most pain.

Leonard Cohen gave us an alternative and put it into our mouths. We atheists can sing it the loudest.

Hallelujah.

The night Saint Leonard died, we walked by the hundreds to his apartment without knowing why. We laid incense and rusty guitars and chrysanthemums and albums and books and bottles of whisky and a fedora on his steps because the music made us do it. Music is endemic to certain islands; Montreal is an island, and so are we.

*You worry that I will leave you.
I will not leave you.
Only strangers travel.
Owning everything,
I have nowhere to go.*

The kids drank wine at the corner of rue Marianne until morning. We sang songs, not realizing they were Buddhist chants, and waited for the cold peal of dawn.

When I got home, I picked up the guitar on my bookshelf, a stutter in my throat.