

FIRES BURNING IN OTHER PLACES

By Reba Fay

If you alone could hear someone upset on the other side of the world, then maybe then you could do something about it. I was once in these mountains, you'd see these fires, other people sleeping out in the mountains, traders across the border, and that gives you this feeling, night time, awareness of other people sleeping. But all it is just a fire light. You see their firelight and you know they are there, that's all you need. That's what ties cities to places that aren't together, deserts, forests, people. You watch over your city or area at night, you see the distant lights, fires burning in other places.

– Burial as interviewed by Mark Fisher, [The Wire](#) (2012)

I always come back to this interview between Mark Fisher and Burial, especially when I'm a) aware once more & suddenly, that I'm alone, or b) in the vantablack, marzipan-thick tangle of creative block. Often – most of the time – these conditions are not mutually exclusive. They are felt together, like ice through a torrent of rain, and since “this pandemic” upended the universe, rendering virulent and inessential the communal musical experience, I've known the two more potently than ever. I don't think I'm alone in this. Since the first rattling chimes of lockdown sent rank glissandos coursing through the air, to be a musician is to be that solemn, proverbial tree in the forest: I am making this gash of noise, but it has not been heard. I have not made this gash of noise at all.

In Fisher's interview with Burial, the latter artist talks about composing [music](#) because of angels. Angels are, in the common imaginary, either grotesque or gorgeous, bewinged and haloed or terrifying and burning. Few representations of angels mediate between these two poles: we've either the pasty, white, genderless seraphs in pre-Raphaelite paintings or the fiery, million-eyed rings of death in the Hebrew *Book of Enoch* (or *Neon Genesis Evangelion*), *oraphim* forever keeping watch on God's throne. Cold protectors. Lovecraft's Old Ones. Though these depictions have little in common aesthetically, their message is the same: angels berate us for being human. That angels are untouchably

beautiful or inconceivably ugly means, also, that they are whole in their enlightenment. Angels are permanent where humans are always in the process of dying. They know God, have seen Him in all His perfection, and are therefore beyond matter. That we seek to know what they know is the crux of religious belief, and also the crux of being human, misunderstanding in perpetuum. That humans have pillaged and slaughtered and wrought upon the earth endless suffering in service of angels comes, too, as no surprise.

The angels for which Burial says he writes music are different, irreligious and small. They are the angels we need to believe in if we are to survive this so-called new normal, and also if we are to keep creating as the world bastes in the thick grey milk of suffering, tasteless and boring as it is thick with pain. Burial conceives of angels as *"...people, and you're disconnected from them, they mean fuck-all to you, but other times you can invest everything in someone you don't even know, silently believe in them"*. Where theology tells us that angels are those beings who chide us for our existential misunderstanding, Burial's angels are that very will to misunderstand in-and-of-itself, given form. Burial's angels are inverse. That we can never truly understand other people is a given. It is why, in *A Lover's Discourse*, the philosopher Roland Barthes describes falling in love as being infatuated "by an image": *I am then seized with that exaltation of loving someone unknown, someone who will remain so forever: a mystic impulse: I know what I do not know*. Burial's angels, however, are those driving forces, those shadows, perhaps, which compel us to want to know other people, to be with and make music for other people, despite their impenetrability. Where religious angels stun us into silence, Burial's angels are the voice from nowhere pushing us to keep making stuff, for whatever it's worth, even if ("now more than ever") materially, it seems to be worth zilch: emptiness given shape. These voices are clear in Burial's music, skeins of vocal samples pitched until they are neither recognisably male nor female, emerging slightly off-grid, looped non-sequiturs that become, over the course of a tune, mantra: [tell me I belong, tell me I belong](#). Mouths unseen. Pandemic music.

Aside:

I'm writing nonsense. I get it. *Untrue* is my favourite album in the world, and maybe I'm imbuing this record – a collection, at the end of the day, of lonely samples, percs, digital synths – and its maker with a mythos nothing material deserves (and music is, indeed, material). But yesterday I found myself, again, alone & shaking on the train, picking at my skin and measuring my left wrist with my right hand over & over again, and looking at the other passengers, their mouths pasted over in surgical polypropylene, a sea of eyes shot through with the undercurrent of death and dying. Then I listened to *Untrue*. That this hiding of the mouth is necessary, I understand. It is imperative, however, that we not allow the voice to be forever tainted with infectious gravitas. We must understand the hidden voice, the voice from nowhere, as an angel's voice. Muffled from behind a mask, it is all too easy for the voice to be privatized, personal, kept to the self, made, as Mladen Dolar in *A Voice and Nothing More* might put it, a "fetish object," inseparable from the speaker. *Because my voice is muddied through cloth, I am the only one who truly hears what I am saying.*

Must I see angels to know they exist? Their voices -- Burial's pitched samples -- are acousmatic. Their heft derives from the fact that the *sine qua non* of being angel is to be unseen and assumed. In the tradition of *musique concrète*, musical understanding is laced with epoché, liberation from the source. Sounds, among them voices, can signal anything, everything, anyone. In this conception, the voice is not fetish-object but a link between worlds. I believe *Untrue* is the ultimate *musique concrète* album.

In his interview with Fisher, Burial goes on to discuss looking at yourself in the mirror and seeing "the devil's face." That's your face in the mirror, but it's not really you, and you know it. Despite empiricists' and libertarians' le epic proclamations to the contrary, John Locke was wrong: we are not born *tabula rasa*, free to be whomever we choose, do whatever we choose. We're beaten around and asunder,

always and since forever, by the lashing waves of circumstance: class position; congenital disease and mental illness; the machinations of a socioeconomic system which necessitates the incessant consolidation of wealth by a small coterie of people at the very top while the rest of the world suffers. The flash of the devil's face in the mirror need not be evil; rather, it is circumstance making itself known; a blush of red through glass. To see the devil is to know you are not alone, to see, also, angels.

In Sherwood Anderson's short story *The Book of the Grotesques*, an elderly writer at the end of his life lies prostrate in bed, looking out his window as apparitions – grotesques – of all the people he's ever known in his life appear and move before him. They are terrible. He can't cope, so he writes a book about them, which he never publishes. This means something. In Rainer Maria Rilke's [Duino Elegies](#), the poet asks, desperately: *Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' hierarchies?*

*and even if one of them pressed me suddenly against his heart:
I would be consumed in that overwhelming existence.
For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, which we are still just able
to endure,
and we are so awed because it serenely disdains to annihilate us.
Every angel is terrifying.
And so I hold myself back and swallow the call-note of my dark sobbing.
Ah, whom can we ever turn to in our need?
Not angels, not humans, and already the knowing animals are aware
that we are not really at home in our interpreted world.
Perhaps there remains for us some tree on a hillside, which every day we
can take into our vision;
there remains for us yesterday's street and the loyalty of a habit so much at
ease
when it stayed with us that it moved in and never left.*

Much has been written about the *Elegies*, and I fear I'm straying from my point – was there ever one? – but it's clear to me that the angels of Rilke's raw, existential angst aren't just those terrible angels of theology, unreal, unreachable, unresponsive when we call upon them in times of need, but also Burial's angels: those voices which call upon him, in the first place, to write, so that others too might read the

Elegies and feel understood, even if imperfectly. I want to keep making music. I will keep trying. The *Elegies* are those fires burning in other places, unfelt but seen; voices unseen but heard; *The Book of Grotesques*, written but seen by no one. And then that tree on a hillside, per Rilke, seen but never touched, and this weird diaphanous web of longing between it all which, however flimsy, is all you need. By the way, the hillside is a barrock: angels snake like gymnasts through the fell, waiting for that tree to creak & snap so they might hear it. *You see their firelight and know they're there. That's all you need.*