

# SIGHT READING

by Jon Tjhia

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– by Eleanor McDowall and Alan Hall, for Falling Tree Productions

—

[swirling, cloudy drone of wistful particles]

## **Jon Tjhia**

Between the Ears ...

## **Suvi Tuuli Kataja**

... Between the Ears ...

[two inquisitive steps up the piano keyboard]

## **Tej Adeleye**

... Miniatures:

[ piano's half-chord resolves ]

## **Chorus of voices**

The five senses.

[ two more inquisitive steps – ears pricking up, a spindle turning and tightening –  
before resolving again ]

[ light optimism fades into the silent dark ]

[ a brief moment ]

— —

—

— — —

[ small splat of electronic notes ]

**Carolyn**

Do you want me to show you?

[ rising wet fizz ]

**Brigid**

Please?

**Multiple voices**

Show me –

**Multiple Jons**

– *Old light.*

[ fizz slurps down to a pensive sequence of pillowy chords ]

**Rebecca**

When you look at light that's in the sky, like through stars ... we ... it's ... it's really old light because it's taken so long to get to us from where those stars are.

[ a syncopated rhythm of sharp electric squirts rises from the soft chords, splayed left and right ]

Everything we're experiencing is slightly delayed.

[ 'delayed' echoes at the edge of perceptibility ]

But I ... I did have a thought the other day when I was walking,

[ broad shuffle of cloth ]

that like everything could be destroyed in a moment ...

[ scuff ]

... and I don't know it yet, even though the 'yet'

[ slip ]

is like a tiny amount of time. If the world just spontaneously combusted, I wouldn't know about it for like ...

**Rebecca/Jon**

*... a fraction of a second.*

[ slip; rapid double-beep, and a tumble of half-seen images rush past ]

**Multiple Jons**

Indelibility.

[ a washing machine chugs mechanically; is it mouthing 'help me, help me?' ]

**Karin**

One day after another after another after another... [sighs] it's very slow actually ... seeing it take shape ... [ amused breath ] ... It just takes so long.

[ the horizon inhales, expectantly ]

**Multiple Jons**

(whispering) One day...

**JJ**

Mm ... hm. Hmmm.

**Multiple Jons**

How to sing:

[ horizon turns a corner, flattening into a thick, flat ominous line of deep drone ]

**Carolyn**

There's this weird thing about singing too, where a lot of people work from images or work from feeling ...

**Multiple Jons**

... morning ...

[ unseen magpies and lorikeets stir ]

**Carolyn**

... and so the suggestion of something can make that thing happen ...

**Multiple Jons**

... canned apricots ...

[ wet sugary slop from can to bowl ]

**Carolyn**

... and so in getting a particular tone ...

**Multiple Jons**

(whispering quickly) military –

**Carolyn**

... or a particular sound ...

**Jon**

(whispering) – jets –

[ the sound of a drone – not the musical figure but the unmanned weapon – a persistent, drawn out 'honk'-shaped tone ]

**Carolyn**

... a teacher might evoke that through feelings

[ Isabella, some small distance away in a room, forms her mouth into a cavern and holds a long note. It is unsteady and unstable, a wavering pitch rising slightly ]

or images ... not technically, s– and there are teachers, there *are* schools of thought where you tilt a particular muscle and you ... you know it's very, ah, technical.

[ Isabella's held note rises over the edge of its vessel and topples into a soft cackle ]

**Carolyn**

But then there's a whole lot of amazing singers who work literally from in ... you know, from that kind of stuff,

**Mia**

Maybe there's like a force ...

**Carolyn**

... their sense of their body or an image of ...

**Mia**

I just think of it as ... rays ...

**Carolyn**

of lightness or an image of openness or an image of...

[ a series of boops pan around – like supermarket items being checked out (softly) ]

**Mia**

Kind of like the sun but ... moon ones. [ a burst of laughter ]

[ boop / boop / you just notice, the birds are still just there ]

**Multiple Jons**

How to take turns:

**Carolyn**

Hello.

Yes it is.

[ breath held against a faintly perceptible world-over-there, part-voices barely contained to the background ]

Nice to meet *you*.

[ a slightly uncomfortable exhalation; a little rotation of sticky mouth sounds ]

**Multiple Jons**

(whispered) How to prove that you're not so bad:

**Alex**

To prove that I'm not so bad ...

**Carolyn**

Yep.

**Alex**

To prove that I'm not so bad ...

**Carolyn**

Sure.

**Alex**

Come get the ball? Huh.

**Sophie**

Awww ...

[ shuffling sneakers on a concrete driveway ]

**Alex**

Ea-sy ...

**Sophie**

Easy.

**Alex**

Easy dub ...

[ skritch ... scuff ... night air ]

**Carolyn**

Yes he has ...

**Alex**

Just ... agh.

[ soft tap, faster feet, dry running ]

Oi, oi!

[ in the distance, a ball bangs against a sheet metal fence ]

**Sophie**

Heugh...!

**Alex**

Missed!

**Sophie**

Uh-huh ... hah ...

**Alex**

Ah-hah!

[ shoes moving again in the dark ]

**Carolyn**

Mm-hmm,

**Alex**

Oi!

**Multiple Jons**

Feedback.

**Carolyn**

Mm-hmm?

[ sudden landing of low, shifting acoustic feedback – energy reverberating between two heavy columns, austere and gently menacing ]

**Lu**

You could look them in the eye, nod your head and ... to show that you're listening ...

**Carolyn**

That's fine, yes,

**Lu**

You might for instance react and gasp and go ... [ sharp intake of breath ]

**Carolyn**

Oh I see,

**Multiple Jons**

(whispered) How to play hot water:

**Carolyn**

[Laughs] Ha, yeah.

[ a kettle begins its sort of embarrassing, tentative whistling ]

**Carolyn**

Oh really?

[ unhinged whistling continues its wily melodic trajectory ]

Or you might ...

**Multiple Jons**

... Pretend to wake up:



[ sleepy chords like first light through shutter shades; the kettle whistles on ]

**Carolyn**

Yes there is...

Is a ...

Okay.

[ the kettle begins to wail into a broader distance, ultimately vanishing from view while the morning light bleeds slowly across a bench of unwashed dishes ]

**Multiple Jons**

Decision.

[ the point of a shovel hacks against dry, rocky earth ]

**Adam**

Every now and again I have to decide to euthanise a snake that's been damaged by a car or a dog or a cat.

[ rocky crunch, gravel crumble ]

Ah, and ... it's the least favourite part of my job. But ... I get to play God.

[ a fly buzzes by in the still air; it's hot and dry ]

... Be the mer– ... the merc– ... merciful God.

[ soft, tentative kick of the ground ]

So this snake is about four or five foot long ... and is extremely damaged,

[ shallow breath, and the fly again ]

and ... there's no chance ...

[ small twigs bend, leaves crunch under the sole of a boot ]

**Jane**

You ... have no sense of the floor ...

[ more purposeful crunching; earth moving ]

**Adam**

... so ...

**Jane**

... so when you step down ...

**Adam**

I'm going to be separating the head from the body.

[ the papery brushing of leaves against one another ]

**Jane**

... you don't know where your foot will land ...

**Adam**

... as quickly as possible.

[ one bushy dig ]

I'll do a final check ...

**Jane**

... it's ...

**Adam**

... spinning the snake ...

**Jane**

... sooo overwhelming ...

**Adam**

Onto its back ... and if it can't turn back over again ...

**Jane**

Terrifying.

**Adam**

... it's all over. Red Rover.

**Jane**

It feels like you can't *not* go in. Certainly feels like you can't ...

**Adam**

This snake will be going ...

**Jane**

... go back and can't *shut* the door.

**Adam**

... back to the land.

**Jane**

You don't walk into it ...

**Adam**

Oh yeah ... it's strong.

**Jane**

... you don't step into it, you just fall into it.

**Adam**

(whispering) You'll be right, mate.

**Jane**

Even if you're still upright, even if you're still it's still falling, because ...

[ another fly buzzes by ]

... there's no floor, no ceiling, no wall ...

[ firm dirt crunch ]

**Adam**

One ...

[ another firm crunch ]

Clean ...

[ the edge of the shovel licks the clay with a thick metallic 'click' / breath pinched in the throat ]

Hopefully ...

[ the shovel scrapes the ground lightly ]

And I've actually managed to bury the head in one action.

[ a few lighter taps with the shovel ring up its wooden handle / deep sigh ]

Sorry, mate.

[ leaning in ]

You see the body's still got a lot of ... a lot of action in it. Or well a lot of *re*-action when I touch it - the body still moves away from me ... quite amazing.

[ fly but now: insistent ]

**Multiple Jons**  
Daily rehearsal:

**Johnboy**

We all sleep every night. Every night we shut our eyes and for a while we're not there. And that's the thing [ long, deep inhalation ] that can be a consolation about death, and about the absence of feeling is that ...

[ after a pause, the rocky clink of the shovel takes up a purposeful, regular rhythm ]

... we do that naturally and it's not as frightening as it seems. That doesn't mean an analogy needs to be made about the idea that we ...

[ fly softly buzzes past ]

... will awake from death ...

[ Adam clears his throat ]

... or that it... that will be a transitional thing. It is simply that the absence... the void is nothing to be afraid of.

[ the shovel drags a couple of times across the twigs, leaves and loose dirt ]

**Adam**

... and my work here is done.

[ the phone rings with an almost leery faux-reggae chirpiness, announces 'unknown caller'; its tinny rhythm cut mid-stanza – replaced by a garbled fragment of a sentence from its hands-free speaker ]

**Adam**

Good afternoon, Adam here?

**Multiple Jons**

Exit music:

[ an urgent tumble of wooden piano keys ring into its cavernous body, like heavy teeth chattering in the cold ]

**Caller on loudspeaker**

Adam, this is [beep], [beep] street ...

**Adam**

Yes?

**Caller**

I was just out in the backyard there with the dog and ... the trough, I see ... looked up, the next minute I seen it, it looked like a red-bellied black to me ...

**Adam**

Yep,

[ one accidental-sounding piano note ]

**Caller**

About a three-footer, I don't think it got the dog, ... [trails off]

**Multiple Jons**

Entry plan:

[ soft clothing and hard clacking objects ring out in a reverberant space, scrapes and knocks echoing against its unseen walls ]

[ you suddenly note a soft surging of bright, muted chords, each push trailing off with the wavering of a flute ]

**Fayen**

(whispering) No, no, I'll do it ... and actually, you can ... you don't have to close the door, you can leave it open,

[ nylon zip-zip ]

but just ... invite (indecipherably soft) ... okay?

**Lorena**

(whispering) Okay ...

[ fabric runs like an open faucet ]

**Fayen**

(speaking clearly now) As each person comes in,

[ one and a half small scratchy steps ]

we're going to hum – *hmmmmmmmmmmmm* ...

**Multiple Jons**

How to –

**Chorus**

*Ummmmmm* ...

**Carolyn**

There's different parts of the voice and they resonate, you know, you can move it around, move it around the body,

[ stepping and shuffling ]

you can move the notes around the body,

[ *mmmmmm* in that big room ]

or feel that you are and you can definitely feel them in different parts of your body. There's um ...

**Jon**

Prawn:

**Isabella**

Well first, I always do the head because it's the most disgusting and messy bit, full of like, mostly ...

[ shuffling, while those soft swollen chords and empty piano notes recede ... ]

**Carolyn**

... something called the 'money note' which is the note

[ the soft ding of a ceramic bowl ]

**Isabella**

... yellow, like, pus ... then you do the tail ...

[ a round, pensive sound stretches across the percussion of snapping prawn shells and fingertips; *mmmmm* ]

**Carolyn**

that, you know, gets you the concert. It's that incredible killer ...

**Isabella**

... then I take off the legs ...

**Carolyn**

... um, note. I mean in awe of other singers' money notes, and sometimes I hear it and

**Isabella** (overlapping)

... go where their heads used to be ...

[ a chorus of *mmmmm* ]

**Carolyn**

I go *oooh*, *that's their money note!* They love that note. I mean ideally you want to have more than one note.

[ soft shuffling and zipping sounds, and that stretched yawn of a chord as a woman says, again: *mmmmmmmm* ]

And you want to have that quality in every note. Um... I don't think I do have a... I don't think I do have a money note. I think I have sounds, too ... it's more like having a family of sounds that I'm fond of ...

[ at a slightly lower, more foreboding pitch: *mmmmm* ]



[ the chord starts to rush into atomisation, moving between the ears as it breaks ]

[ telephonic static pierces it as it grows louder ]

**Multiple Jons**

Keep going:

[ many feet run in tandem ]

**Roger**

But maybe there's a reason behind it. Maybe the struggle is part of ...

**Long**

Once you start ...

**Roger**

... my medicine.

[ group *mmmmmm* ]

**Long**

... you can't really stop, because your hair, especially as the years went by ... more and more grey hair, if you then ah, suddenly do it again, then everyone will notice *oh!*

[ jogging fades into a muffled chug ]

**Multiple Jons**

Move on:

**JJ**

... so it might be a little bit cliché but for me, people live in moments, like countless moments. So sharing a short time with a total stranger is kind of cool and a fun overlap for me ... like a overlap with people ...

**Multiple Jons**

How to be low:

[ a deep rubbery rumble growls under the floor ]

**JJ**

... and that is the only time we're meet in our lives.

**Multiple Jons**

The wind.

[ the sudden entry of dry leaves brushing against each other in a strong breeze ]

**Lu**

... so do this ...

[ exhales thinly: *ha* ]

... the 'H' sound is a good place to start,

*ha*

and ... .. hmmm. Let me practice.

[ whispering; emphasising each syllable ]

*hel-lo*

...

*how aaare you*

[ deep rumble drags and stretches into itself ]

**Multiple Jons**

Waiting:

**Brigid**

Well yeah, a person's expression can drop ...

**Lu**

There's a lot of exertion in speaking loudly,

**Brigid**

... and yeah, their face will change ...

**Lu**

... so you want to rein that in ...

[ whispering: *like this* ]

**Multiple Jons**

*More sentiment:*

[ slow, sad fingers fall gently on piano keys in a pensive pattern, unresolved but suggestive of old dramas ]

**Brigid**

But that could be in a million different ways. I guess it's ... something where somebody feels ...

**Jon**

Likeness.

**Scott**

I think it's easy to do without listening. I might just listen one more time, sorry ...

**Brigid**

Uninhibited, to some extent? though I've also kind of like begun to enjoy the way people pose

**Scott**

(screaming) Wooooorld record!

**Brigid**

when they know they're being watched, and that can actually be more instructive,

**Scott**

(screaming) Woouooooorld record!

**Brigid**

In many ways.

**Scott**

(screaming identically) Woouooooorld record!

[ further away: *yep* ]

**Multiple Jons**

Feed a stranger:

[ small cardboard boxes and plastic packets shuffle; piano and rumble recede ]

**Virginia**

I think I should add ...

**Multiple Jons**

(whispering) Paint the walls.

[ bright, jazz-suggestive chords sparkle and swirl up in sequence ]

**Virginia**

Another one and a half cups of water.

**Multiple Jons**

How to love, mistakes and all:

**Virginia**

But it says it's up to my first knuckle and I feel I trust that method more, for some reason ...

[ chords burble and swoop into one another ]

**Ahmed** (singing, haltingly)

Who should I give my love to? My respect and my honour to? Who should I ... who should I pray to ... who should I pay good mind to ... after Allah and Rasulullah? Comes your mother ...

(faltering) who gives ... who next? Your mother ... who next? Your mother. And then your faaaatherrrr ... 'cause who used to hold you and sing you goodnight? Who used to ...

[ chords: gone! ]

**Multiple Jons**

(whispering) A small fire:

[ a very brief crackling fire; abrupt in, abrupt out! ]

**Fayen**

How to inhabit time.

**Zeno**

Go over here.

[ the sound of outside, and shoes crunching on dry grass and gravelly soil ]

I really like this fallen log, I find it really interesting because it's been here since I was very little and it hasn't changed at all. And there's *nearly no remnants* of the tree that it used to be. And in fact the hole (deep nasal breath) next to the base is starting to fill up.

(a little breathlessly) So ... I think this is quite beautiful because, um, was once a big tree, and then after it fell down, all the plants have come like to surround it. And ... I think that's quite nice. Soon there'll be no remnants that there was ... a tree here. It'll just be a log.

[ distant chattering birds ]

After the log? Probably there'll be no remnants of anything here ... I think.

**Multiple Jons**

Reflection.

[ a chord, heavy and metallic, stretches out before you. a bird or an insect – it sounds like a small guiro, let's be honest – scratches curves into the centre of this sound. the chord sort of inhales itself with a giddy breathiness ]

[ snatches of voices and other sounds blurt into it until, with a slip of tape,  
the chord drops into a moment of dry spooling ]

[ then an immediate silence ]