

This is an excerpt from a larger work that explores the notion of stillness in movement, in repetition, in relation through the body. This reflect(x)ive piece understands stillness through a temporal reflection of the past in the present and future. Stillness here is created in and through movement.

### *Story 1: The Sound of Stillness*

**[February 20, 2021]**

It is a cold, gloomy, still day. I am listening to a music piece that Hrushikesh sent me this morning, as I sip my chai. I am drinking chai instead of my usual coffee because something about cold, gloomy, still days makes me want to feel as close to home as possible. Close to my home in India, not the one I have created for myself here in Canada. The stillness of the day is making itself felt as I look out my window. The falling snow is still, the bare, leafless branches of the trees that surround my apartment are still—and in stillness, they hold onto the falling snow, as if, the snow is the leaves they are missing. The somber music is still. The air is still. And, somehow, the stillness encourages me to move.

*Can movement happen in stillness? Can movement be still? Can stillness be/come movement? Can sound, which is always in movement, be still?*

I ask myself these questions, as I gauge the tension in my body. A tension between wanting to move, wanting to dance, and staying still, just like the falling snow, the music, the air. Acknowledging the tension, and trying to find answers to my questions, I notice that the vapours rising off my chai are gently breaking the stillness. I want to move, I want to dance, but I cannot. I sense the urge to feel even closer to home. The chai is not enough. I light an incense. Frankincense. Its scent reminds me of similar mornings at home. They—the scents of chai and frankincense, and their warmth bring about a sense of longing and nostalgia, that both breaks through and adds to the stillness of the morning. The vapours rising off from the incense and the chai, scented, warm, determined vapours- break the stillness, as the stillness continues to encourage me to move.

As I prepare to dance, I sense a familiarity in the stillness. The tension is overwhelming. I am losing control of myself. I am afraid of losing control. I resist.

*What am I resisting? Am I resisting stillness? Or movement? Or am I resisting the recognition of the familiarity in stillness? What am I afraid of?*

With more questions in my body, I prepare to dance. As I start dancing to the music piece that Hrushikesh sent me this morning, the vapours of the chai, the incense, and I are now breaking the stillness.

But soon, I sink into the stillness. I am dancing, but I am still. It is a kind of stillness that engulfs, it also disrupts and ruptures. *How can stillness disrupt? Is not movement supposed to break stillness.* As I dance with these questions, my body still feels the tension of being in stillness and in movement simultaneously and urges me to let go and become one with stillness. As I let go of something that I was holding onto, and surrender fully to the stillness in movement, and through movement—a memory comes to me.

I am reminded of an interaction with my Guruji (*teacher*) from years ago. Something that he had mentioned as I went to close the door of the dance studio we were practicing in, on a Saturday morning in December 2004. It was also a cold, gloomy, still morning. But the stillness had not engulfed me like it has today. What had engulfed me then was the sound of my Guruji's words, his ghunghroo, his tatkar, as he told me,

"Don't close the door, leave it open. Let the sound of your ghunghroo, tatkar, bols, of your dance, dissipate and break the stillness of the morning. Let the sound leave, break through, and come back to you when you are ready to receive it, and nurture it within your body."

"How will I know when I am ready?" I asked eagerly.

"You won't! But the sound will know. It will know when to come back to you and reside in you, guide you, engulf you." He spoke with conviction, like he knew what that coming back of sound to a dancer's body feels like.

"What kind of sound?" I ask.

"The kind that resounds and resonates. The kind that moves you and guides you through the movement. The sound of dance [Kathak], and the sound of the dancing body. The sound comes from within you, but you have to let go off it first."

I did not know seventeen years ago what to make of it, and I do not know what to make of it now.

*How can I know that sound has come to me, when I do not know what kind of sound, as I could understand it, my Guruji was talking about? And how is it important when learning Kathak? Do I need to know what something feels like, to recognize that it is residing in me, or that I have lost it? How can sound, an inanimate medium, that simply relays, know when to come back?*

I continue to dance with these incomplete but fiercely present thoughts lurking within and around me- also breaking the stillness. Slowly, I find myself coming back to the stillness of February 20, 2021. The stillness of today. I find myself trying to make sense of the experience, of the tension, and of the memory. I have never thought of the encounter of December 2004 before.

*Why did the memory come to me only today?*

While I am fumbling to make sense of this profound experience, my body knows what to do and how to articulate this experience. Through the bols and movement of *Thaat*, a component of Kathak dance, that is performed at the beginning of a performance, usually in *Vilambit Laya* (slow speed), to create a structure for the rest of the performance, my body gracefully articulates the in-between-ness of being in stillness and in movement-simultaneously. *Thaat* emerges in-between the bols and ends on *sum* (the final beat of a beat-cycle). As I have learnt it, *Thaat* is one of the only components that allows being in both stillness and movement at once. On February 20, 2021, *Thaat* has emerged as the only way to articulate the tensions of stillness and movement and to be in stillness and movement at the same time. Through Kathak, I be/come the falling snow, the bare, leafless trees that are holding the snow, the vapours of the incense and chai, and the dissipated sound that may or may not come back to me. I am both in stillness and movement.

In the meditative swaying, I realize that I was holding onto the memory of stillness, letting sound dissipate, and my Guruji's sound from a Saturday morning in 2004 like the trees are holding onto the falling snow. I continue to sway to the bols of the *Thaat*, for a few moments more.

*Ta thaye thaye tat*

*Aa thaye thaye tat.*

*Ta thaye thaye tat*

*Aa*

*Thaye*

*Thaye tat*

*Ta.*

Then, I let the memory, the familiarity, the stillness fade, as the vapours of the incense and chai fade.

You, the reader, the listener, the spectator will learn that in the next few weeks, the memory of the Saturday morning in December 2004 coupled with the memory of February 20, 2021, will keep coming back to me.

**[March 10, 2021]:**

Today, not a very cold, gloomy, still day, I was told that I am starting to lose my ability to hear in my right ear due to the cochlear injury I had sustained a few years ago. It was a matter of time before this day would come, so I could have been prepared, and I am prepared, for it. Albeit, I have secretly hoped that it would not happen, but at least, it explains the dizziness, the headaches, earaches, the nausea of the last few months. It is treatable. My doctor in India, who had initially treated my injury has a plan. I can wear an invisible hearing aid, and no one will know. Even though it is a slowly progressing condition, my perception of sound has changed drastically and quickly, in a matter of hours. I am sensing it not as voice or volume, but as vibration, as movement. I suddenly feel that my capacity to hear sound has reduced, not in the sense that I cannot hear, I can, just a little faintly than usual, as if sound is coming from far away. I cannot feel it as fiercely as before. It feels as though I am losing something.

Was my Guruji referring to such a feeling of loss when he said, “you have to let it go first?” I think of the stillness of the Saturday morning in December 2004 and of February 20, 2021. I don’t feel the tension of being in-between stillness and movement anymore. Today, I feel as if I am losing the ability to frame knowledge about my surroundings and the world at large (Novak and Sakakeeny 2015: 2). I feel that my internal experience of sound, as sensation, is disconnected from my external experience of sound, from my perception of its physicality. And I wonder if my ability to dance, and my relationship with dance will change. And I wonder even more deeply if the coming back of sound, its circling back to where it was let go off happens in the between-ness of this experience, and this [dis]connectedness of being (Feld 2015: 13).

I begin to sway to the bols of the Thaata,

*Ta thaye thaye tat*

*Aa thaye thaye tat.*

*Ta thaye thaye tat*

*Aa*

*Thaye*

*Thaye tat*

*Ta.*

In search of stillness and movement. In search of familiarity. I cannot go back to it. I remember the familiarity in stillness, but I cannot feel it again. My relationship with sound and dance has changed. And, I am changed too, through the presence of sound, and its absence.

I continue to wonder if the sound has come back to me in absence, granted I had successfully let go off it on the Saturday morning in December 2004. Now, every time I practice *Thaat*, I feel the bols relaying the stillness of a cold, gloomy, still Saturday in December 2004, February 20, 2021, and the unsettling disconnectedness of the day I found out that my perception of sound will change forever. I feel them conveying the memory of the stillness that still unsettles me. I feel them conveying sound like I have never felt before.

*In Stillness,*

*Vishwaveda*



## Notes

1. The bol is a mnemonic syllable used to indicate rhythm and sound in most Indian Classical Dance and Music forms, including Kathak.
2. These photos were taken on different days from when the story is written, however, they represent the notion of stillness being explored here very vividly and accurately.

### Works Cited

1. Novak, David and Matt Sakakeeny, eds. 2015. *Keywords in Sound*. Duke University Press.
2. Feld, Steven. 2015. "Acoustemology". In *Keywords in Sound*, edited by Sakakeeny, Matt. Durham: Duke University Press Books.