Sounds

Yesterday I got a phone call that aroused my curiosity to no end. It was the voice of an Italian who had been in the United States a few years (rhythm, pauses, accents, vocality, the hunting down of words). And his name was Federico. “I hear you’re interested in New York gardens,” he told me, and then he proceeded to sing the merits of one situated between Delancey and Broom Streets, Forsyth and Chrystie Streets, in the heart of the old Lower East Side. “Early on Saturday and Sunday mornings you’ll find the Chinese there. . . Chinatown, you know, is just a few yards away. . . Some of them don’t even speak English. They take their birds—the “Emperor’s Birds”—to sing there. . . .”

And so this morning, at eight o’clock on the dot, there I was in front of the small half-moon-shaped area of green at the northern limit of Sara Delano Roosevelt Park: the Wah Mei Bird Garden. I spoke at length with Federico Savini and Anna Magenta, two Italians who had been living for some time in New York. Both were active members of the Forsyth Street Garden Conservancy, one of the many groups set up to create and protect gardens within the city. They told me of the herculean efforts required to save just a few square yards of earth, to lay out this garden with its multitude of different plants (some of them grow berries that certain rare species of birds go mad about, thus encouraging their return to the city), and to defend it from hordes of developers intent on squeezing the area for all its worth and transforming it for their nouveau riche clientele (some time ago the area really had its work cut out trying to defend itself from the forays of yuppies from nearby SoHo: their huge dogs wasted no time in messing up the gardens).

Then they told me about the Wah Mei, the “Emperor’s Birds,” and the deal struck with the elderly in Chinatown. They explained that many of the men living in the neighborhood hurry to order one of these birds (which come from the Yang Tze area in China and, more generally, from Southeast Asia) as soon as they’ve managed to put by a few hundred dollars. A wee bit bigger than our thrushes, the birds have a reddish-yellow plumage dotted with grey and olive
green—and a white outline around the eye: hence wah mei, “painted eyelids,” like the eyes of the beautiful Xi Shi who, as legend has it, lived centuries ago. The birds are very well looked after: the cages are kept spotless, special birdseeds are used, and, most importantly, the birds are taken to sing in the open air at least twice a week. It seems that this activity keeps the men of Chinatown busy in what little spare time they have left, and the demons of gambling (forever the scourge of the community) are kept at arm’s length.

As I spoke with Anna and Federico, a host of silver-haired, middle-aged men started turning up a few at a time. They were carrying wicker or wooden cages covered with cloths. The cages were laid out in rows, one beside the other, arranged among the garden plants or latched onto the fantastical architecture of gas and water pipes, which had been collected and laid out here and there. Only these men went into the garden. (Federico warned me not to go too near, a sort of unwritten pact: what had literally become a ritual had been disrupted by too many inquisitive people with cameras.) They waited a few moments to give the birds time to adjust themselves to the light of day, and then the cloths were removed.

In that instant, a unique concert of solos, fugues, canons, songs, melodies, and countermelodies burst upon the metropolis, silencing the din of traffic just a few yards away, transforming the whole scene before me into a kind of Oriental garden, and accompanying the measured gestures of the old people playing tai chi in the garden close by.

I wonder if a history of metropolitan sound has ever been written. It would be interesting to study all the different elements involved, the transformations that take place with each passing epoch, the effects on the life of the city and in the city, and the way in which culture recorded and incorporated it. As far as New York is concerned, a fine book by Robert Snyder titled The Voice of the City (1989) takes as its subject the birth and development of vaudeville, and reminds readers that one of the possible etymologies of the term used to denote this form of popular entertainment is, unsurprisingly, voix de ville, “voice of the city.”

But what is the voice of New York? Has this voice changed now that the Elevated no longer cuts across all Manhattan with its vibrating steel structures, and the agonizing siren songs of massive ocean liners docked along East River and the Hudson are no more? Someone, perhaps Walt Whitman in 1842, wondered what had New York—noisy, trembling, bustling, stormy, turbulent New York—to do with silence.

True, there are (though they do exist) very few pockets of silence in this city, where sound is a kind of continual comment on everyday life, a genuine leitmotiv that sums up the thousand contradictions of the city—strident,
aggressive, and violent, or sweet, soothing, and amicable. In certain subway stations, the thunder can be frightening in the extreme, a rolling rumble that almost induces feelings of panic as the train draws near. In others, however, as soon as you walk through the turnstile you may well be greeted by a group of middle-aged people, splendidly striking up, a cappella, the notes of Carl Orff’s *Carmina Burana*, and collecting money in a cardboard box marked “Music Below the Pavement.” J. D. Salinger was right when he wrote in *The Catcher in the Rye*: “New York’s terrible when somebody laughs on the street very late at night. You can hear it for miles. It makes you feel so lonesome and depressed.” And then you pause for long minutes in the chaos of Astor Place to listen to a street musician who teases fascinating melodies from his portable keyboards. Sure, with its honkings, sirens, skiddings, and brakings, the traffic is a constantly grating presence. But the streets of New York reverberate with an incessant variety of sounds and noises: the voices—full, high-pitched, and rhythmic—of those who live the streets, the witty remark of a young black leaning against the wall, the rustling of squirrels in the grass or among the branches above, the hurried scurrying along the massive sidewalk stones, the wooden thud of skateboards leaping up steps, the intermittent whirring of helicopter blades, the metallic frizzle of police car radios, the full-throated singing of a passerby... a succession of sounds that demands our attention, that creates a tension all of its own.

Once removed from their fortuitous and fleeting condition—their fluctuating consistency—they are sounds that, like the images we have of New York, tell us a great deal about the history and culture of the city. For example, someone whose name escapes me for the moment once said that the sound of the jackhammer typifies New York in the same way the chiming of Big Ben typifies London: and its resounding centrality—its sheer physical everyday reality—cannot but remind us (yet again) of the mainsprings hidden away in the depths of the metropolitan mechanism.

But the experience of sound in New York is extremely various in nature. I remember the first night I spent in Queens, many years ago. I was awoken by a peculiar hissing sound continually wailing away and changing pitch; sleepless from jet lag, I simply had to satisfy my curiosity. Unable to resist the temptation of discovering where the noise came from, I got up from the sofa bed in the sitting room where I was temporarily being lodged, afraid of turning on the light for fear of waking my hosts. Hands stretched out in front of me, I started fumbling about the house in search of where the sound was coming from, and on reaching the kitchen I let out an almighty yell: I had grabbed hold of the massive, boiling-hot pipe of the steam heating system. The sound had given me a sharp—and decidedly palpable!—lesson in the history of the city.

Since that time I have learned to recognize (and live with) the variety
of sounds that fill the apartments with an almost physical density and
bulk: the vibration of the air as it sneaks its way about the stairways of the
high-rises, crying out in the corridors and shaking the doors; the howling
of the wind that whistles through cracks in the guillotine windows; the
depth droning of the air-conditioning system of the supermarket below the
house; the sound of a phrase muttered in the narrow streets that echoes
all the way up to the top floor . . . It is difficult not to be reminded of some-
thing that Fitzgerald wrote in “My Lost City”: “The gentle playing of an
oboe mingled with city noises from the street outside, which penetrated
into the room with difficulty through great barricades of books . . .” But
this sparks off memories of another night in New York (again, after I had
just flown in), when a typically frenzied block party, or jarana nuyoricana,
lulled me off to sleep at five in the morning with an extremely limited and
aggressive mix of salsa and merengue being played at a nearby corner
turned into a square and dancing hall.

All this music making in the city’s public places . . . Of course, it is not
an exclusively New York experience, but I do not think it is an entirely casu-
al phenomenon, either. It has much to do with a very direct relationship
with the metropolis, its spaces and its rhythms. True, ragtime did not start
off in New York, but it did establish itself between New York and Chicago
and become a defining musical characteristic of the city with its jumpy, syn-
copated rhythm, its constant repetition and unraveling of a dominant
theme, almost a “three-voice canon with ground bass” (maybe it is for this
reason that I love Pachelbel’s Canon so much, and continue to associate it
with cities like New York and New Orleans). Besides, when ragtime trans-
fomed itself into jazz there is no doubt that the sound of the Tenderloin,
San Juan Hill, and Harlem poured back into it, providing it with life and
body, with its incessant variation upon themes and the improvisations
taken from life and survival in the streets. And then, I wonder in my igno-
rance if the presence of the piano hasn’t been a determining factor in all
this, what with its unique timbre and its own very special way of playing.
And the metallic rhythms of the banjo? The almost human voices of the
clarinet and the trumpet, and the constant roll of the drums? And the
bands that reproduced all this urban polyphony: from Louis Armstrong to
Duke Ellington, from the cool jazz of Lennie Tristano to the bebop of
Charlie “Bird” Parker? This is a relationship between music and the city that
is perhaps best defined by Duke Ellington’s Take the A Train.

George Gershwin understood it all to perfection. A Jewish lad, he grew
up in immigrant neighborhoods, taking on board the voice and the music
of the streets, hanging out on street corners and patronizing saloons with
little theaters in the back room rather than going to school. His Rhapsody
in Blue is a splendid synthesis of this complex metropolitan score. And all
the major figures in American popular music understood it: the popular music that was born and developed in New York—the so-called Tin Pan Alley (a great musical pun, this one: the name stood to indicate the area of the city where that kind of music was written, published, and played, but it is also a deliberate echo of “tympanum,” or the eardrum), with Irving Berlin (that Izzy Baline who, following his arrival as an immigrant in America, worked for many years as a waiter-singer—another exquisitely urban voice!—in a Chinese restaurant, before changing his name and occupation), Cole Porter, and, of course, the Leonard Bernstein of West Side Story fame. And the Marx Brothers understood it, too: their whole language was an astonishing musical score whose utterance required an exacting sense of rhythm, timing, and pauses.

It can hardly come as a surprise that one of today’s most successful shows is Stomp, which dominated the bill for so long at the Orpheum on Second Avenue, one of the legendary theaters dotted about the East Village—an extraordinary adventure in metropolitan music, recreated on stage by exploiting to the fullest the dancing body and all those objects directly related to the street: sticks, tins, garbage cans and lids. And neither is it by chance that recent years have witnessed the rebirth of Yiddish and klezmer music in the heart of the Lower East Side (at the Knitting Factory, when it was still located in the dilapidated old building on East Houston Street): yet another synthesis of voices and experiences that take on a unique dimension and tonality in an urban context.

Then there is the whole history of black music, from the melancholy and desperation of the urban blues to the aggressive rhythms of hip-hop and rap. I must admit that the latter fails to fire me with enthusiasm (much to the disappointment of my students), but there is no doubt that it encapsulates something of the sharp blades, the jagged corners, the rough fabric, and the tense edginess of day-to-day life in the metropolitan ghettoes. The history of rock in New York has been no less important, with names ranging from the Velvet Underground to David Byrne and the Talking Heads, from Patti Smith and Laurie Anderson to Billy Joel and Willie De Ville. And, towering above them all, Lou Reed, the rock singer of the city, with his crude ballads like “Walk on the Wild Side” and the splendid New York album, right up to his surreal and self-mocking participation—very “metropolitan”—in Smoke and Blue in the Face, two films that saw the light of day thanks to the united efforts of the director Wayne Wang and the writer Paul Auster (a genuine star cluster into which the many voices of New York plunge headlong: words, images, sounds . . . ).

Music and the spoken word meet, intermingle, and blend as one here, and the dialogue between the two is continual. From the end of the nineteenth century on, literature recorded this voice of the city (in its usage
of slang, and in the tight weaving together of English and immigrant languages) and transferred it to the page. And the same thing was accomplished by the musical comedy, a new genre that could boast celebrated operettas like *The Black Crook, The Mulligan Guard Ball, The Belle of New York, A Trip to Chinatown,* and genuine hits like *Give My Regards to Broadway, After the Ball, The Sidewalks of New York, Ta-Ra-Ra Boom-De-Ay!* and *The Bowery.* Literary modernism certainly did not sit back and watch. Indeed, it positively endorsed this dialectical relationship, especially in poetry (but how can one forget the sheer musicality of novels like John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* or Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep,* described as “the noisiest novel in American literature”?). And the Beat Generation, whose direct bond with the multilingual polyphony of New York is infinitely stronger and more representative than all subsequent flights into the Orient, did everything in their power to glorify this relationship between words, music, and the voice of the city, as can be seen in the ongoing prose of Jack Kerouac, the Whitman-like bardish song of Allen Ginsberg, the street epiphanies of Gregory Corso, the asphalt-concrete compositions of Diane Di Prima and LeRoi Jones, the visionary verses of Bob Dylan, and the debunking songs-cum-poems of Ed Sanders’s and Tuli Kupferberg’s Fugs.

This tradition survives today in the poetry of Harlem, the Bronx, and the Lower East Side, and especially in the works of Nuyorican poets like Pedro Pietri. Take, for example, his *Telephone Booth* poems:

I will tell you
how to get there:
walk 3 blocks down
& 8 blocks across
& 4 blocks backwards
& 7 blocks around
& 6 blocks up
& 9 blocks down
& 5 blocks across
& 1 block backwards
& 2 blocks sideways
& 3 blocks wherever
& you will get there sooner or later

Or, as an another example, his *Prologue for Ode to Road Runner,* where words become music—music shaped in words—and the poet’s rhythmic singing accelerates apace:
Over the last few pages the sounds of the metropolis have first become music and then, increasingly, words. In 1894 Stephen Crane wrote in his jewel of an urban narrative, An Experiment in Misery: “The roar of the city in his ear was to him the confusion of strange tongues, babbling heedlessly.” In Crane’s time several linguistic processes were under way. On the one hand, the American language was gradually distancing itself from its English counterpart. As wrote Finley Peter Dunne, the creator of Mr. Dooley, the scathing Irish figure blessed with a parlance all of his own: “When we Americans get through with the English language, it will look like it had been run over by a musical comedy” (Mr. Dooley Remembers: The Informal Memoirs of F. P. Dunne, 1963). On the other hand, a specifically New York jargon was developing as a result of the fusion of different languages held together by a particular connective tissue. According to A. J. Liebling (Back Where I Came From, 1990), “Basically, New Yorkese is the common speech of early nineteenth century Cork, transplanted during the mass immigration of the South Irish a hundred years ago.” Certain terms and expressions originating from this neck of the woods have now become an integral part of the city’s language, like smithereens, shillelagh, or speakeasy. With regard to these matters, H. L. Mencken’s The American Language (1919) is a fascinating work, casting a precious light over the plurilingualism that lies at the heart of the American language and, in particular, of the New Yorkese.

Most important was the emergence of a genuine metropolitan slang consisting of linguistic forms and constructs, lexical deformations, syntactic structures, jargonish images, and new words coined to fit in with new metropolitan phenomena. Any attempt to trace the contorted path along which New York slang developed necessarily implies that we undertake another fascinating journey through the social and cultural history of the city. And this is precisely what Irving Lewis Allen has done in his The
City in Slang (1993), helping us to understand that even from this point of view the metropolis is always a living organism, pulsating and constantly in motion.

On reading Allen’s book one feels that the sounds of the city echo all around us in the shape of words and meanings. We learn, for example, that Broadway has many nicknames: Fraudway, Mazda Lane (from the name of the famous lightbulb company, and with reference to the luminous spectacle to be seen along the street at night), Beer Gulch, Via Lobsteria Dolorosa (inspired by the restaurants serving up lobster specialities, starting off with those located around Times Square), Orange Juice Gulch (taking its origins from the 1920s and 1930s, when costermongers sold their fruit from barrows), Neon Boulevard, Tungsten Territory, and the Great White Way (invented one morning at the end of the nineteenth century after exceptional snowfalls). Allen also explains the meaning of certain expressions like *don’t get ritzy with me* (from the Ritz Hotel), *red mike wit a bunch o’ violets* (meat cooked in salt with cabbage: from the jargon expression for saltcellar, or *Mike*), *smart aleck* (from the name of a famous mid-nineteenth-century New York thief, Aleck Hoag), *shyster* (an unscrupulous lawyer, from the American-German *Scheisser*), *slaughter in the pan* (a raw steak), and *to lay someone out in lavender* (to send someone to jail, an expression whose origins are extremely complex: it goes back to the ancient custom of pawnbrokers—known in England as Lombards or, in its twisted form, lumbers—of tucking lavender bags into the linen underwear deposited with them; in English slang, however, *to lumber* also meant “putting someone in prison,” and in the end the two meanings overlapped and blended together).

We hear once again the jargon of waiters and cooks, or the shouts of bouncers and hucksters, both past and present, and real tongue twisters like *Rosebeefrosegooserosemuttonantaters*. And then we are led into the more mysterious and dialect-ridden territories of specific sectors, like those bound up with precisely defined areas of the city. Take Times Square, for example, whose lingo was codified (or, better, was recreated, or even invented, before being released into the realms of urban folklore) by the writer Damon Runyon in the 1930s and 1940s: sports jargon rubs shoulders with those of the Mafia and the world of entertainment, words and expressions are whipped off the street only to be deformed or interpreted anew, and linguistic borrowings taking their origins from the provinces and small towns are remolded on (and for) the metropolitan experience (and William R. Taylor has some fascinating things to say about this in a lengthy chapter on the subject, in his *In Pursuit of Gotham*, 1992).

In everyday speech, dominated as it is by rhythm and speed, this **slang**—this “language of the city”—often becomes pure sound, continually
remodeled and modified by pronunciation, accent, and forever-changing outside influences. It is a source of much amusement to deconstruct and reconstruct it, maybe with the help of the precious (and previously mentioned) anthology by Botkin, *New York City Folklore*, or the little book by Judy Levine and Nancy Jackson, *How to Speak New Yorkese* (1988), whose gentle comical blending together of distorted pronunciations, unlikely etymologies, and city culture is a treat: assawayigoze (that’s the way it goes), *duhshuh-ul* (the shuttle that connects Times Square with Grand Central Terminal), *Statnylant* (Staten Island), *whyntchalookeryagoyn?* (why don’t you look where you’re going?), *eggzawsted* (exhausted), *lieberry* (library), *mash patadas* (mashed potatoes), *shuddup* (shut up), *dreckshuns* (directions), et al. . . .

But the sound of the city is made up of many different voices, and not just those of ever-mutating slang. When immigrants arrived in their masses around the turn of the nineteenth century, New York must really have been something to see, but the soundtrack must have been great to listen to as well, what with Irish, German, Italian, and Yiddish battling it out with Cantonese, Arabic, Spanish, and a host of local and dialectical variations. The Germans provided New Yorkese with *delicatessen* (or *deli*, an absolutely crucial addition to the city’s topography) and apparently made a decisive contribution to the invention of the term *hot dog* by jokingly referring to the sausages sold in New York as *hündchen*, or “puppy dogs”; the Chinese made a present of *chop suey* to the United States, a cheap dish deliberately invented to satisfy the needs of an unsophisticated clientele (it seems that it derives from *shap sui*, a Cantonese term meaning “a little bit of everything”); Italians living in Brooklyn and Little Italy remodeled language and dialect in their continual reworking of American English, coming up with *sciaddappa* (shut up), *goraelli* (go to hell!), *Forte Gelato* (Fourth of July), *toidävenne* (Third Avenue), *vazzumara* (what’s the matter?), and *tamaniollo* (which, it seems, stood for the beer tankard that emissaries from Tammany Hall—the name given to the corruption-ridden headquarters of the Democratic Party in New York—offered newly arrived immigrants from Sicily in exchange for their vote); and above all, there were the Jews from Eastern Europe, who introduced the city’s language to Yiddish terms like *schmaltz* (oversentimental), *alrightnik* (a Jew who is completely integrated), *chutzpa* (impudence), *shnorer* (professional beggar, or someone badly off), *meshumed* (apostate), *shlemiel* (poor wretch), and *bagel* (one of the essential ingredients of Sunday brunch in New York).

During this period between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, language was subjected to continual tension. That William D. Howells had understood this is evident from his
review of Abraham Cahan’s Yekl, when he spoke of “a New York jargon which shall be to English what the native Yiddish of [Cahan’s] characters is to Hebrew, and it will be interlarded with Russian, Polish and German words, as their present jargon is with English vocables and with American slang.” Henry James, albeit in a far more vexed and worried vein, had understood this, too. In The American Scene, the book that recorded his sense of wonder and disappointment on returning home to America, he wrote: “The accent of the very ultimate future, in the States, may be destined to become the most beautiful on the globe and the very music of humanity...; but whatever we shall know it for, certainly, we shall not know it for English—in any sense for which there is an existing literary measure.”

And it is a never-ending story, this one of the “accent of the very ultimate future,” forever evolving and undergoing transformation. While walking around the metropolis, new and hybrid linguistic forms echo all around you, confirming the sensation that this is very much an ongoing process. It is the speech of Harlem: its tit-for-tat exchanges from windows and on the stoops, its noisy cries, its dirty dozens—those verbal challenges on the street consisting of twelve aggressive and insulting wisecracks aimed at the enemy’s ancestors that only come to an end when one of the two challengers loses his cool... a whole universe that is not only linguistic but cultural, too. It is the Spanglish of Loisaida and the Barrio—a constant chipping away at the English block on the part of Caribbean Spanish, which not only imports terms like arroz (rice), piraguero (water ice seller), bodega (the local corner store that sells everything), botánicas (the store that sells religious articles), bolitero (the guy who collects clandestine bets), jarana (the wild party that lasts all night), mofongo (spicy snacks), and many, many more, but which also changes in alchemic fashion (almost as if it were simply a question of contact, proximity, and friction) both the languages. As Sandra María Esteves, a close friend and an excellent poet, writes: “We defy translation.”

Now, there is something familiar about this dense universe of sounds that is New York, and I think I may have grasped what it is. On one of my departures from the city I sat down in one of the bars at JFK Airport to wait for my flight to be called. I was scribbling down my final notes and impressions for this book when the singer and performance artist Laurie Anderson (I recognized her immediately) waded in and sat down next to my table. A few minutes later we were chatting away. I must say that I don’t like everything she does—some of it is a wee bit too cerebral for my liking, and I tend to prefer the rock music of Springsteen or Lou Reed. That said, she is definitely a genius in her field, blending together music and image, sound and the spoken word, song and monologue, and the
classical and the avant-garde in a way that is at once irresistible and very New York. We spoke for a while about her concerts and my books, and she wrote down a few lines in my notebook that I cherish to this very day. When I got up to go toward my boarding gate, she smiled at me in that typically idiosyncratic way of hers, something akin to the smile of a metropolitan elf: an Ariel-like figure who had just sprung out from the forests and hills of Manhattan island. It was then that I understood what was so familiar about the sounds of Manhattan. I couldn’t help but think of Caliban’s words in Shakespeare’s The Tempest: “Be not afraid; the isle is full of noises. . . ."

In the mornings, when the sky is still so clear, with only a glimmer in the east beyond the river, I am sometimes awoken by a twittering sound on the windowsill that seems to be saying, “Pretty soon, pretty soon, pretty soon,” whatever that means. Then I get up and prepare my coffee, and I sit down to drink it on the wide window ledge of the sitting room, knees tucked in beneath my chin, a fresh October breeze blowing outside the window, and look down into the street. At this time of the day, it’s almost as if there are no sounds of the city: perhaps they have all been carefully wrapped in the cotton wool of morning, or hidden away somewhere beneath the sidewalk in their very own Pandora’s box. As Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote in “English Sparrow (Washington Square),” “How sweet the sound in the city an hour before sunrise.”

Then, as the eastern sides of the tall blocks gradually slip on their golden-tinted attire, the cotton wool disappears and Pandora’s box opens. Sounds burst forth, they move in the streets, rebound off the walls, fill the houses. You can almost touch them. The day will be full of them: the intermittent wail of fire trucks rushing by, the screaming of police cars, the long, drawn-out screeching of braking yellow taxis, the dull thud of cars landing on the huge metal sheets thrown down to cover up the roadworks, the obsessive chanting of antitheft devices, the roaring of the subway, the machine gun–like chorus of jackhammers, the rhythmic pounding of drills tearing up the earth to lay the foundations of a new tower block, the guttural shrieking of the poor wretch hobbling along the sidewalk, and the vibrations emanating from a radio sitting on the shoulder of some ghetto boy. And then maybe, at night, in the seething half-light of the Nuyorican Poets’ Café, the verses of the poets of Harlem, Spanish Harlem, the Bronx, and Loisaida: verses steeped in anger and irony, a blend of longings and frustrations, tenderness and harshness—less a contemporary babel (as one might be tempted to conclude) than a polyphony—a concert of ostensibly discordant sounds that eventually settles and amalgamates, and tells the metropolis.

Hence, when I am at home in the evening, the windows tinged with red and
yellow as the city at last cools down and catches its breath, I know that I will shortly hear the ice-cream truck coming from afar, almost as if in a dream. The sounds of the city continue to clash and overlap even at that hour, but the sweet melody of the approaching truck—like that of an immense music box—is a charm able to dialogue with these sounds, almost reconciling them one to the other. The truck reaches the corner, then it stops for a few minutes down below, filling my house with familiar notes and affectionate melodies, hypnotic in their undulating movement, and enfolding every other sound—every other noise—of the pulsating city at dusk.

At that moment I stop whatever I’m doing, and smile: that dainty music box melody is my very own private New York “Nocturne.”