

Dysfluencies

Rolf Brabander

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By: Rolf Brabander

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Signed by the final examining committee:

_____ TBA, Chair

_____ Darren Wershler, Examiner

_____ Mary di Michele, Examiner

_____ Stephanie Bolster, Supervisor

Approved by _____

Jill Didur, Chair of Department

Dean of Faculty

Date _____

Abstract

Dysfluencies

Rolf Brabander

Irregularities in the flow of fluent speech, dysfluencies are breaks caused by a person's stutter, extended or repeated syllables and other forms of non-fluent communication. These are most often discussed in the realm of speech pathology, when specialists of communicative disorders endeavour to treat people affected by them.

Verbal articulation varies in nature, and some types are less fluent than others. It is this broad sense of the term "dysfluency" that the thesis explores: the scope of our patterns of communication is comprised not only of disorders or lack of them, but of subtleties and delivery. Fluency, perhaps, is not as simple as a lack of stutter, or a standardized verbalization. Grammatical and syntactical differences can also dramatically alter the sound of a sentence. These poems express the nuances and difficulties of communication between a patient and his speech therapist, and track the gradual disintegration of their conversation. As the voice of the stutterer becomes increasingly anxious and introspective, the poems begin to offer examples of the many types of miscommunications that occur in human interactions. By the second half of the thesis, the therapist/patient dynamic transforms into an exploration of the misspoken and the unsaid.

From the formal language of speech therapy to the anxiety in a troubled relationship or a man talking to a deceased relative, these poems explore language and the dysfluency of speech, finding through both compression and sparseness the possibility of more fluent communication.

For Melanie

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The code

One of us is the listener, and the other, speaker.
Zero interrupting during the session, OK?

Once you've started speaking, I'll track your words
one by one.

Zero on the scale represents complete fluency.
Zero is actually unattainable, just there as a base.

One other person should be here, at least
once during the initial stages.
One family member who can calibrate their ratings with mine.

Dysfluency

I say so often I don't know
instead of letting myself talk.
I cannot seem to keep the flow.

Your voice is calm, the questions slow,
and still I am so quick to balk
and often say I don't know.

If I swear it might show
the answers always hit a block,
I cannot seem to keep the flow.

And when your eyes begin to glow
hoping I have been unlocked
I say again I don't know

how can it be? It's as though
I'm made of rock
and cannot seem to keep the flow.

I mute the urge to throw
my voice against the tide, to squawk,
and so I say I don't know.
I cannot keep the flow.

Severity rating

On a scale from 1 to 10
how difficult was it to dig
inside me, searching for my voice?
Could you hear it through the noise?

At 5 I could hear you say
that your fingers felt rough,
that your hands were getting muddy
that it was real work, and not play.

A dip to 3 and your eyes widened
a secondary reaction, relief,
the way my wide eyes tell
that I hit a speech-bump, and fell.

Did you feel like you'd have won
if I could've made it down to 1
and kept it there for you
to soothe your fingers' thickened skin?

Chain of communication

1.

Choose to acknowledge that
words each have their own shape,
carefully carved, whittled
and ultimately sublime.
Let them come to you naturally.
Go find them.

2.

Syntax can be quickly flipped,
plays games quite readily.
With a little practice,
your hesitation will run and hide.
Mouth the rules to yourself, as a habit.

3.

Sounds like “you’re getting the hang of it”
will become commonplace,
always in support of your improvement.
Have a good time listening to them,
meaning: straighten your back, breathe in.

4.

Easy to imagine how it's all supposed to sound.
Right? Can't you see it in a flow-chart? your lips in the center,
now not moving so much as listening?
repeat cycles of nuanced messaging
forever undulating in and out of your mouth.

Treatment phases

1.

Imagine the problem directly in front of you.

Step around it.

Circumnavigate, flow,

get away from it, scat.

It'll stay there, bobbing,

a marker of something large,

something you'll sometimes bang into

to remind you who's in charge.

But what's that drone coming from the lights?

Is it even coming from them, the watts, is it?

It's a drilling tone

brilliant on your tongue

which is now front and center

stuck on an L.

2.

Behavioral intervention
sounds so aggressive.
Speech language pathologists
at the ready with weaponized feedback.
But the program actually helps
acknowledge the stutter,
give praise for smooth talking.

3.

There are moments of anxiety
followed by sudden relief.
a crack in the session room's air,
trying to make its way in.

4.

but my voice is utterly unreadable
although my face is an open book.

Split

Is my brain being re-mapped?
Is it rewiring when I stop and start again?
If I just stuttered through the sentence
could my neural pathways remain unaltered,
or is each stumble a forced change on its own?

To coordinate the movements
of tongue,
mouth
lips
thought.
To conduct the players with an invisible baton
in the dark middle of my mind.
To feel the whiz of words as skin on my body.
Yours, everyone's.

Holy shit.
Is it possible to do this unconsciously?
Will my dreams take different turns
when their actors mess up their lines?

I said

things I didn't mean to say
but sounded kind of nice

“telling me a story” to avoid
“crying”

I noticed how smooth my words were
even though they weren't my words

nothing, sometimes.
A lot with a look.

I'd find it difficult to pick a voice
among my many

“but here I am.
Ready and willing”

Change of Address

I prefer speaking
to someone I imagine near you
as if that person
were shadowing you for me
lending his shadowy ear.

Flutter buzz

Listen. Let me finish.
All my words will end. In FUCK!

Infrastructure of therapy clutters
my brain, a slow FUCK!

slight fixes appear when the hum
dims some, small bits FUCK

by bite-sized bits
broken down, I need to pause.

And suddenly I say butter
because it nicely doesn't end in fuck,

but sounds like the beetle
eating fuzz on a mound

of carrion or dung
I can't tell the difference

but the noise shutters fuck
at the end of all my words.

Incombustible

You aimed the flame at my mouth
and saw the futility.

Blaze enveloped me
but I would not burn.

I could see your steamed eyes
narrowing hard, throbbing.

A woman suddenly stepped
out of me. That woman took the heat.

You lit her up, understanding
there was no choice.

Our breath stopped,
we watched her roast for me.

We later spoke of my braver half,
how she'd eat the fire when I'd need to break.

Complete silence

Let's take a break.
I'll slow down
right to the point where
you won't know if I'm going to continue what I was saying.
You won't know if I'm about to cough or clear my throat.
I won't do either,
but my hand will clench and move toward my mouth,
and I'll lean into it,
but then I'll just rub my chin with
my slowly opening fist.

Hopefully I'll look thoughtful.

I might think about a screen saver,
the kind that comes built-in,
fast-moving swirls of sharp colours,
lines disappearing as others come into focus,
an image constantly fading into its next phase.

But you're good.
You might think about Michael J. Fox
and how he moves and bops
to make his condition look less obvious.
Scratch head, touch nose, lean in, rub knees.
Straighten back, look around, scratch head...

You'll know what I'm doing, but you won't hear it.

Inheritance

Time really isn't on my side.
Take the fact that my mother had me,
twin of another version of me
talking mostly to myself
trying not to sound crazy
tiptoeing around real conversations.
Take it easy, she'd say,
telling me it was all just in my head,
that grandpa only gave me
tobacco addiction and some old tapes.

Jail

I'm sitting by a cage in a room of cages
and this one has an open door.
The rest of the room is filled with
all kinds of prisoners.

You keep walking in and out of the cage
to show me how easy it is
to choose
to be locked up or not.

I notice the other prisoners
fiddling with the latch from inside the cages,
but none of them bust out.
It's quiet inside.

I notice later from inside
that the latch is trickier than I thought,
that we all just want to escape.

Mouth to mouth

You reach out to me every week.
You let me do the talking.
You pull me out of the muddled earth.

I am yours to fix.
I fix what I can.
I can work hard with your hand.

We begin set apart.
Weak work
until you send me back
back gladly breaking
happy to break under the lights of your room.

What if I change my name?

Ben sounds sorry for the inconvenience he's caused.
Rick is brave, but somewhat belligerent. Seems bitter.
Carl is relaxed. Really nice. Relies on praise and responds well.
Steve can't come every time. Convinced he's cured, not too concerned.
Mike. Self-assured. Sounds smooth. Speaks freely and spills his guts at every session.
What if my name changes me?

Out there

Being asked to slow down,
the question, always, "what was that?"
The looks, long stares,
head inching closer to my mouth, as if some perfect proximity might modulate my voice.
Somehow.
Embarrassed.
Wishing there were a window in every room everywhere. To look out when I'm stuck
inside.
Not seeing my reflection in any window, but seeing clearly out there: a small curly mutt
yelping at its owner's feet, or a child wheeling down a slide.

Session break

Windows firmly shut
the wall clock's hands getting loud
a disordered room.

We can be fluent

I wonder 'bout the times we need to speak,
those godawful times in between
moments of soft cheek reds
and curling lips.

I wonder if we need to make those sounds,
even if we've already heard each other
hurt and heal
like two bent stems.

I wonder if for just one day we can shut our lips,
smack each other on the back,
shake hands
or just sit.

I wonder if we ever need to speak again
to anyone at all
when we have all there is
to hear.

Changing the conversation lets me see how you blush each time I trip, and so I relax my lips, tongue still darting like a snake's.

Who's listening?

You only hear me
hiding from the light
a colder version of you.

The Cab driver is making some good points

No. Intolerance is the problem. But also ignorance.
You think I am probably quoting lines. No.

Freedom to express? No.

I made a complaint, once. I know a man called me some bad things.
I said I don't make complaint, I make it known that it's wrong.

Yes. There is lots of space. Especially for children.
Mazda? No. Rust.

Aieeee Shit!

No. 3 boys is a lot, but you have to install social values.
Not like software. But install by showing.

No. Sometimes people don't go anywhere else. They don't know.
People are different, of course!

You know Algeria? There is a proverb:
the flu is the laziness sickness.

You feel useless, yes?

Solo

The cello's note drops as a curtain slowly onto my head,
a thin, sheer material,
changes the light and smell of things.

It's tempting to stay under
the cover of this note,
to become foreign,
unrecognizable

to watch through the haze of music
as the person next to me stands up,
looks for me with confused eyes
and an open, crestfallen mouth,
then gives up and leaves.

I think I'll stay veiled
in the music's brume
until the room clears
and I'm alone.

Alone

I stand on a planet of 7 billion people
with my head tilted up
toward a ledge of pigeons,
and wonder how many there must be
cooing and strutting above me

how many are just looking for work
like a retired postal worker or abandoned pay phone
what messages might they deliver for me
to all the other people passing by

I stand on a planet of 7 billion people
my head tilted
to the flutter of wings
as they fly off the ledge first down then up.

Single

Nightly now she paces while I sleep,

at the far end of the room
she dances always with a different partner.

I can never see her face
but I hear the music well and know
she must be smiling

I can never seem to cross the floor
to ask her where she'd gone
once the band had left.

Left

A man walked past me today
who looked just like my friend

who died 13 years ago.

He had a baby strapped to his chest
so I followed him to have more time
to study his face, and the baby's.

I didn't believe them
to be a ghost and the baby of a ghost,
but he looked so much like my friend
that I couldn't resist staring at them.

If there were many versions of him
and some had been fathers,
how many of me might be walking around
or dead, for that matter, and how many kids?

For a couple of blocks I stalked,
faking distance while closing the gap,
hoping to see something in him
that would recognize me.

Coach

Looks at a man facing him,
himself in 30 years.
that him is asleep,
his second chin supporting his first

so that his head wobbles and pivots
on a deflated rim just above his collar bone.
He seems to hear himself notice,
eyes open briefly before his head falls and rests.

Looks at the slack gap in the sleeping him,
thinks he looks tired, but not sad.

Wonders which him is riding backwards,
and where future him will step off the tracks.

The bazaar

I met Norwegians in the basement of a church.
They were huddled under one hand-knit sweater,
trading open-faced sandwiches and grins.

As I moved through the room they followed,
smelling of onion and wool.
I looked at their food and crafts
and listened to their soft, thick words.

One woman stood beside me and said:
A troll descended onto Oslo, once.
He towered over people, and trees grew from his head.
Roots curled down his arms and twisted into fingers.
He came to remind us of his strength and age.

I turned and saw her hard eyes spread ice
down the wrinkles of her cheeks, smoothing her face.
I felt mine cooling, too, and wanted to crawl under the sweater.

A wheel of light shone through a window
onto her head, and saplings reached through her hair,
bent toward me.

I cannot find the words

As she waited for me to respond
I imagined my blood slapped the concrete
fast and thick
as my body blew apart,

popped in a series of splits
ripping from skin
down to dry, white bone.

no twitch or flap of any ex-piece,
but haze rose from the soldered thro
of what I now was.

I thought of the crunch
of my bones under her feet
as she walked away
before I had the chance to answer.

Change of season

She didn't answer him while the wind picked up
and rustled about the dead leaves at their feet,
but nodded instead, deliberately, as if to note the
slowing tempo of the day.

She didn't look up to see the heat of the sun
resigned to the tamarack, but chose instead to think
how their needles would only support the charge so long,
and fall.

She waited until what he said dissipated
into the loggy smells of chimneys and rot,
and turned and faintly smiled.

Ode to the gentle touch

So great a gift, to sweetly speak!
As nights redress the days, and mourn
themselves at light's return,
a soft and subtle call to wake

as feathers in a nest might brush
against another's face,
and charm the lids to lift
despite the pull of dew

the song that calls the storm to break
and flood the barren shores,
then lull the dregs of yesterday
into the scope of sunken age

the nudge and smile of friendship's force,
the blush of understanding eyes,
All of this I sadly missed
when you announced your pregnancy.

A Chat at the plot

I want to talk to the skull
under my grandmother's tombstone

ask and argue through its chambers
who it really belongs to

breathe hot gossip
onto its cold, muddy crown.

I want to glean from its clamped grin
something dark, of my ilk

an old smirk, perhaps
from an old tale of stealth

and its fused face with pits,
absent glaring in my hands.

I would lick between missing eyes
the thin divisive line

test the pith of its brow
against the wet tip of my tongue

and with taps against its dome
sense the cold buzz in my mouth.

I want my grandmother's skull
to know my breath

to hear the way I speak
with trace of touch.

Smooth talker

Standing on the corner, waiting for the light
holding his hand, afraid to look at him

I know his mouth is stutter-locked
that he wants standard banter,
the jaw swing of styled tone

he squeezes my hand instead
as if to reroute his voice
through the blood of our palms

and I hear the beat of his voice
pump through my skin,
pump up to my eyes that see
what he says about me

and the street, the lights and cold air,
warm hands gripping tight to stay close,
the need for us to rush across at the green
to make it in time for another light on another block
where he can hold my hand again and
smooth talk to me in the grip of our fists.

First words

There's a moment, precisely when an infant's forehead bounces off the floor, that its face contorts in the most fascinating way.

It's a spastically arranged tableau of facial muscles in the shape of perfect shock and some pain, and absolutely breathless, the child's only voice becomes the new form of its features.

The power of the infant's face, in that moment, depends emphatically upon the impact its figure may have on an adult observer, the reaction it can elicit from its distinctive misshape.

The unfortunate child, while unhappily on the verge of firing an array of diphthongal shrieks to complement the horror expressed on its face, is briefly privy to a purer method of communication.

The uncoordinated parent, buttery-palmed babysitter, or simply serendipitous guest is then also a participant in this communicative oddity in which a life in its infancy relates the totality of a sensation that is evasively indefinable by the reservations of adult speech.

The infant unrestrained by language, to our horror, communicates masterfully.

It's in the leg.

You distort me. You talk to me as if what we've already done was worthless and what we hoped would never happen in fact now is. I suppose this talk is meant to prepare me for the stock I should put into the truth of this fact. But I don't hear your words so much as I see them covering me with a film of an ordeal. This is now an ordeal. You told me that you didn't want to be a part of it. But you are. You are a part of this thing that's happened to me, that started nowhere and is ending here. You're telling me this. You know that it

started with me and the way I am, the way I breathe, the way it is. What I want, though, is for you to tell me that you know even better, that my breathing isn't really the problem, that it's not in the way that I am and breathe, tell me it's somewhere else, even in me. Tell me it's in the leg and then cut off the leg and throw the fucking leg out. Tell me to let go of the leg and to learn to walk differently.

Alzheimer's somewhere here

I know nobody
who knows me
who might have brought him here.

Yes, it's nice this visit.
He has big eyes, blue, like berries.
I should ask that blue eyed boy for a beer.

Quite silent tonight.
He looks this way a lot, and lost
mother must be worried about the time.

He has a very fine voice. Grave.
He might be looking for the window
to see if his jeans are on the line.

That young man has quite a stare
as if he's lost something and thinks
it's somewhere here.

Break-up sketch

The phone continues to ring
while outside garbage men
throw tightly tied bags
into the truck
where they are crushed
and disappear.

A sigh signals
the release of brakes.

Two

They sit like bookends
silently across from each other,
as if they weren't
bothered by the countless stories
between them.

They think
there are no words

they need to speak.

Last family meal

After lunch we stumbled
out onto the front steps
and huddled for a picture.

We did our best to look happy
to be together,
anticipating the command to do so.

Most of us straightened our backs
or turned slightly
to make room for each other.

My father just stood expressionless,
waiting for my mother
to take the shot.

Stress

Veins bulge
with a burden carried quickly
back and forth,
from the hardening knot
above the eyes
to embrittling toes
curled downward

as if to drill
through ground.

It is a closed circuit.

Grinding teeth
like the heavy closing
of an old door
that, once shut,
will only keep more noise in.

Big talker

I died and had my body shipped to Ecuador
where some ancient tribespeople
hacked off my head and shrunk it.

Brain was sucked out through a straw,
skull was boiled, lids and lips were sewn.

My head was tied to someone's long braid,
where it bopped off his back as he ran through the forest
looking for more heads to shrink.

Eventually I was hung
on a pole with other heads,
where we rapped
against each other's hollow skulls.

Front of the class

My heart thuds like car tires
rolling over metal bridge joints
but is drowned out
by the stress,
thick steel bending in my head

and the mad teacher eyes my hand
as I print my name on the board,
each letter a hieroglyph for panic.

I put down the chalk: it clicks like a switch
and covers my fingers in ash.

I turn to face everyone
who might listen to me
if I could only speak.

The cattle knocker

He delivers the final blows to cows' heads
just after their conveyor belt ride
and just before they're hung to bleed.

He lets go of the hydraulic gun
between shots

to pause and hope
that his shift is done.

He is careful not to blink
as he presses the metal peg
between their eyes and mouths
the word "beef".

He listens to the muddled moos
on the factory floor, and like a tuning orchestra
the awkward sounds envelop the room
and become sweet.

Chatty neighbour

I stared at my eyelids and saw
my neighbour as a baby

he'd died old years ago
but his child face now was the same.

And his son appeared,
held his father to his great brown beard

and my dead neighbour's face
became his son's mouth

and neither could speak
with the baby's round eyes below the son's nose,

they both looked surprised
that I was asleep,
as if there was nothing to see.

How

I never understood you
to want to hear
what I can say.

Should I ever try
how do I reach you?

The buried

one-sided conversation,
The moss around the stone
grows fat.

Sound

Your mouth covers my ear
like a shell

but all I hear through your
cold silence
is my breath.

